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Christian Philosophy and Classroom Practice: Is the Gap Widening?



by John Van Dyk

In the busyness of maintaining and promoting Christian elementary and secondary day schools we may not forget the *reasons* for our efforts. But are Christians in the Reformed tradition really clear on why they willingly spend large sums of money on Christian schools? What, indeed, *is* the purpose of Christian education?

Reasons for Christian Education

One would think that in the Reformed community, composed of people who think of themselves as

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firmly rooted in the Scriptures and who have grown up with Kingdom and covenant theology, we should meet with a virtually unanimous response to this question. The reality, however, is quite the contrary: a disturbing diversity of arguments for Christian schooling is current among us. Here are just a few of them:

(1) The hothouse argument: The public schools are getting so bad that separate Christian schools are the only option. Only Christian schools can keep our kids safe from the big bad world, if not from sin itself!

(2) The academic excellence argument: Nowadays public schools graduate youngsters who can't even spell their own names! That's why we need Christian schools: to show the world that we, Christians, take learning and knowledge seriously.

(3) The spiritual argument: In public schools prayer is banned, and teachers can teach only evolution. We need Christian schools because without prayer and Bible lessons our kids will become totally secularized.

(4) The we've-always-done-it-this-way argument: Look, my parents sent *me* to a Christian school, and, hey, I turned out all right! So it's only natural that I send *my* kids to the Christian school. It's our tradition. In fact, my parents would leap out of their wheelchairs if I didn't send their grandchildren to the Christian school.

(5) The witnessing argument: Christian schools offer a superb opportunity to witness for Christ, especially in the arena of competitive sports. Why, the Christian school's basketball team won the state championship and the sportsmanship trophy to boot. The team sang hymns in the locker room! If that's

not enough reason to support the Christian school, I don't know what is!

(6) The keep-'em-in-church argument: Look at all the bad stuff kids are doing nowadays. We need to make sure that our youngsters grow up to be good loyal church members, because that's what will keep them on the straight and narrow. Sunday schools and catechism help, but that's not enough. We need Christian schools to make sure our kids stay in the fold.

Do any of these arguments reflect a Reformed perspective? Of course not. The fundamental reasons for continuing a tradition of Christian day schools are rooted in the calling we have as Christian community to bring up our children as servants of God. As the Apostle Paul reminds us, Christian teachers are to equip our youngsters for works of service.¹ Our schools are to prepare our children for knowledgeable and competent discipleship in a world that worships self, possessions, winning, power, and personal comfort. The high calling of our Christian schools is to be and to graduate bright lights in a dark world. Consequently, a Christian school that places virtually no emphasis on training our children for a life in God's Kingdom hardly has reason to exist.² When we use one or all of the pseudo-arguments cited above, we are only kidding ourselves, and the money we spend on Christian education could surely be more responsibly allocated elsewhere.

Platitudes and Practice

It is easy to say this, of course. It is easy to articulate a series of eloquent statements about the purpose of the Christian school. Bringing these principles into daily classroom practice, however, is an entirely different matter. Expressions such as "the child is the image of God," "doing all things to the glory of God," "putting Christ in the center of all subject matter," and "teaching for discipleship" are easy to utter, but terribly hard to bring into daily practice. "I know what Christian education is supposed to do;" the Christian school teacher declares. "I understand the purpose of education. I know our philosophy of education. But, pray tell, how do I implement it consistently in my classroom? How do I do it, day after day and week after week?"

To be sure, many Christian schools have mission statements. These statements articulate what

teachers in Christian schools are supposed to aim for. Too often, however, these documents describe generalities—perhaps even pious platitudes—which leave the Christian school teacher totally unequipped to put the statement's lofty thoughts into effect in the classroom. Often the best our teachers can do is implement such statements in only two ways: modeling and devotional activity. But when it comes to the nitty-gritty of subject matter, teaching methods, managing the classroom, exercising discipline, evaluating the kids, and keeping records, many teachers find that the statements of purpose have suddenly grown very silent.

Thankfully, many Christian school teachers realize that modeling Christian behavior and devotional activity, though vitally important, is not sufficient. They recognize the dualism in the claim that modeling and daily devotions are *the* ingredients that make a school a genuinely Christian school.³ One cannot Christianize teaching activity by merely adding a religious and personal veneer to an educational program that intrinsically may not differ all that much from the one in the public school.⁴ Happily, many teachers who recognize this dualism seek to overcome it. But in so doing, these dedicated school teachers face another dualism: the dichotomy between statements of principle and concrete classroom experience.

Perhaps we can characterize, somewhat unkindly, this latter dualism as a dichotomy between "platitudes and practice." Many teachers see a chasm between a Christian philosophy of education and their daily work in the classroom. Practicing teachers as well as students training to become teachers commonly perceive such a dichotomy. Consider the following illustrations:

(1) Several years ago the Dordt College Center for Educational Services conducted a survey to find out what "teaching Christianly" means to teachers. One of the questions we asked was: What obstacles prevent you from teaching Christianly? A surprising number of teachers responded by saying that although they had learned much philosophy and theology in college, they did not know what teaching Christianly really means. They even suggested we ought to do much more to help them understand how the "philosophical theories" can come to expression in their classrooms.

(2) With disturbing frequency, student teachers (in their final year of a Christian teacher education

program) report that experienced teachers advise them: "You're now in the *real* world. Forget all that theory you've learned—it won't help you in the classroom." Many beginning education students, too, display a similar kind of impatience with the philosophical and historical foundations of classroom teaching. Their concern is often limited to practical matters. "Teach me how to teach," they frequently tell me, "never mind all that 'theoretical stuff.'"

Note that these two examples exhibit differing perspectives on the role of educational philosophy. The first example depicts teachers struggling with the question: How do I link Christian principles to my work in the classroom? These teachers take a positive attitude towards foundational questions, and seek to relate them to their daily tasks. For these teachers, a Christian philosophy of education is not a set of platitudes. Of course, philosophical foundations can easily *become* platitudes for them, if all they hear from convention speakers and education professors are abstractions, with few or no references to practice.

The second example, however, suggests quite the opposite. It displays an intentional disdain for foundational matters and regards only the immediate practical issues as important and worthwhile. In this view, philosophical and worldview issues are merely platitudes, to be patiently endured and quickly dismissed as irrelevant. The real world of the classroom is a world of practical concerns.

Observe that neither one of these approaches escapes being rooted in a philosophical perspective. Both of them reflect a form of pragmatism, a philosophy to which I shall return shortly. The first approach we may call a "soft pragmatism." It is a sort of "pragmatism by default." Teachers given to this position recognize the importance of practical classroom knowledge. After all, almost the entirety of their work as teachers involves practice. But these teachers also realize that, as Christians, they must work at bringing a Christian perspective to bear on the curricular and pedagogical decisions they make in the classroom. In other words, their heart is in the right place. But partly because of the nature of their own education, and partly because they are too busy to reflect, they have not closed the gap between Christian theory and practice. A Christian philosophy has not yet replaced the "soft

pragmatism" that guides their work. Not surprisingly, these teachers have no choice but to assign priority to practice.

The second view we may designate as a form of "hard" or "crass pragmatism." This position fails to recognize that worldviews inform and shape classroom practice. Teachers who express disdain for educational philosophy are unknowingly driven by the subtle theories of pragmatism. There is, then, an irony here: there is *de facto* no dichotomy between worldviews and practical classroom experience, even in the case of those who reject worldviews as irrelevant.⁵

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Reasons for the Gap

The frequency with which these two perspectives appear prompts a troubling question: Is the gap between Christian educational principles and classroom practice widening? I am not sure. Nor do I know what kind of evidence is needed to draw a firm conclusion. What does seem clear is that such a gap exists. Hence a second question: Why might this be so? Why do teacher education programs, for example, including those at Christian colleges, struggle to overcome the charge that such programs are impractical, theoretical, and irrelevant? Why do so many Christian elementary and secondary classroom teachers find it hard to link what they have learned about the Kingdom to their daily task? Why is it so difficult for many teachers who know about "putting Christ in the center of things" to actually do this?

This is a huge and complicated question. Virtually every Christian educators' conference addresses it. Explanations are legion. Suggestions to overcome the problem abound. Not the least of the reasons for the gap has been the nature of much educational research. Not only has much of the research been

abstract and remote from teachers' concerns, but also the findings and conclusions are often contradictory. Educational research simply lacks the necessary credibility.

Similarly, teacher education programs have not convinced students that foundational issues determine what teachers do in the classroom. Although currently undergoing drastic revision, teacher education programs still carry—not without grounds—a stigma of offering little more than abstract, irrelevant drudgery.

In addition, educational philosophy in general has confined itself to categories that teachers do not find exciting or helpful. Traditionally, educational philosophy has remained stuck in distinctions such as those between realism and idealism, or between perennialism and essentialism. While these categories have some merit, they often do not address the issues with which the classroom teacher is confronted.

In the remainder of this essay I shall discuss briefly three additional reasons for the worrisome gap between educational philosophy and classroom practice: the intellectual tradition of the West, the power of pragmatism, and the structure of the curriculum.

The Intellectual Tradition

Early in the intellectual history of the West a sharp distinction between theory and practice was introduced. Think, for example, of Aristotle's categories of theoretical and practical science, and modern philosophy's discussion of theoretical and practical reason. This history provided the soil, so to speak, for a flourishing dichotomy between foundational and practical concerns.

The early Greek distinction between theory and practice paralleled their distinction between knowing and doing (or, to use other terms, between thinking and acting, or between reason and conduct). To the Greek philosophers, thinking was superior to acting. Thinking was akin to the divine, while action suited the *hoi polloi*. In the early Christian era, the relationship between knowing and doing took a new turn with the introduction of a third category: faith. Not only did early Christians have to consider the relationship between knowing and doing, but also between believing and knowing on the one hand, and between believing and doing on the other.⁶

As the centuries rolled by, the problem persisted. In the Middle Ages faith was thought to be the most important of the three. In modern times the spirit of rationalism, rejecting medieval theology as quaint and archaic, placed all the stress on knowing. During this period the concept "reason" greatly enhanced its status as an autonomous guide to life. More recently pragmatism dethroned "reason" and declared that truth can be ascertained only by doing. Only by our practice can we decide what is true and false, or acceptable and unacceptable.

While it makes sense to distinguish believing from knowing and doing, to separate them into disconnected modes is mistaken. As the Reformational perspective has maintained all along and postmodernist epistemology confirms, there can be no knowledge and no action without faith. Our beliefs affect both our knowing and doing. Similarly, knowledge is much broader than a narrow positivistic rationalism would have us believe. It makes sense, for example, to talk about knowledge of faith, theoretic knowledge, and practical knowledge. As Blomberg and Gardner have pointed out, there are diverse ways of knowing, including probably some ways we don't even know about!⁷ The same interconnectedness holds for doing. Both believing and knowing are forms of doing. They are activities. Faith always involves the act of believing, knowledge the act of knowing.

The ancient assumption that faith, knowledge, and action constitute three distinct orders of reality, three separate, intrinsically unrelated modes of life, directly affects the Christian school teacher today. It generates an environment composed of three circles. The first circle, oriented to the category of faith, has to do with spirituality and caring; the teacher must be spiritually attuned, care for the students, and function as a good role model. The second circle, reflecting the realm of knowledge, contains all the right philosophical and perspectival statements. The final circle consists of the specifics of daily teaching practice. For many teachers these three circles scarcely touch each other. There is little or no overlap. They represent three different worlds.

The Scriptures, of course, know of no gaps between knowing and doing or between believing and doing. If there is any biblical distinction at all, it is between *hearing* and doing. The one continuous act of believing and knowing is to do—to obey—what the Lord requires of us. Regrettably, this

biblical perspective is seldom heard in the larger educational world. Powerful voices perpetuating the polarizations of the past continue to make it difficult for Christian teachers to connect educational philosophy with classroom practice.

The Power of Pragmatism

One of these voices is the voice of pragmatism. It is not an overstatement to claim that pragmatism is the most powerful philosophy operative in the educational world today, at least, in the English-speaking world. It controls our schools, our educational programs, and the life of the teacher. Emerging, as we saw, after the heyday of the age of faith and the age of reason, pragmatism powerfully asserts the primacy of practice. Neither faith nor reason can direct life, according to the pragmatist. Only practical utility must shape our actions.

Pragmatism affects our teaching in a number of ways. First, as we have seen, the influence of pragmatism lulls teachers into thinking that philosophical reflection is essentially a waste of time.⁸ Foundational matters fall outside of the "real world." Theory is acceptable only if it is clearly and immediately relevant to practical classroom concerns. There is an irony here as well: pragmatic teachers who demand relevance often teach abstract and irrelevant subject matter themselves. A history teacher, for example, may demand relevance in educational theory while at the same time his students see only irrelevance in the content he is covering.

Secondly, pragmatism encourages teachers to look for recipes. It prompts them to be ever searching for new tips, always looking for teaching methods and learning activities that will work even better than the ones they've used before. To be sure, professional teachers should be open to creative innovation. The recipe syndrome, however, looks for new ways without considering the larger philosophical contexts or the theoretical foundations that drive and shape the recipes and tips. A close bedfellow of pragmatism, therefore, is eclecticism.

Finally, and most importantly, pragmatism promotes a disdain for normativity. The norm, after all, is what works best. Guided by personal preference, the pragmatic teacher selects and decides strictly on the basis of workability. In so

doing the pragmatic teacher ignores the critically important contextual and teleological questions: What philosophy of education does this or that tip presuppose? Where does it come from? What is its history? What view of the child does it assume? To what end should I use this or that method anyway? And the like. Jeannie Oakes has described this neglect as follows:

We seldom think much about where practices came from originally and to what problems in schools they were first seen as solutions. We rarely question the view of the world on which practices are based—what humans are like, what society is like, or even what schools are for.

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We almost never reflect critically about the beliefs we hold about them or about the manifest and latent consequences that result from them. And I think this uncritical, unreflective attitude gets us into trouble. It permits us to act in ways contrary to our intentions. In short, it can lead us and, more important, our students down a disastrous road despite our best purposes.⁹

We can easily see why pragmatism makes it difficult for teachers to link Christian principles to classroom practice. The very nature of the pragmatic creed prevents teachers from asking what the Lord wills or what his Kingdom demands. Pragmatism locks up these questions in the "spiritual circle" or the "platitudes circle." Pragmatism, then, ensures that the gap between confessed beliefs and practice will widen.

Curricular Influences

The history and nature of school curricula further explain why teachers have trouble linking basic beliefs and practice. In our Western tradition, with its propensity towards analysis, schools have grown accustomed to an exclusively discipline-oriented curriculum. Consequently, the standard curriculum, as we know it, is thoroughly fragmented. It consists of disconnected pieces which we call

“subjects” and “skills.” Teachers teach subjects and skills, and our children’s report cards display grades for subjects and skills. Our school systems reinforce this fragmentation when, for example, already at the sixth-grade level we departmentalize the classroom. From then on students move from one classroom to another and from one subject to another, as if from one world to another.

It is important that we not confuse a discipline-oriented curriculum with the encyclopedia. I use the term “encyclopedia” in the sense of “range and arrangement of the sciences.” Various sciences abstract and study various dimensions of reality. Surely these sciences, such as aesthetics, linguistics, economics, logic, physics, biology, and mathematics, are perfectly legitimate and necessary. We need to distinguish sharply, however, between the encyclopedia and the curriculum. Too often the curriculum is simply an echo of the encyclopedia.¹⁰ While the encyclopedia refers to scientific inquiry, the curriculum has to do with teaching and learning.¹¹ Curriculum construction must keep in mind factors—such as child development, learning theory, pedagogical effectiveness, and educational goals—that the encyclopedia can safely ignore.

A fragmented curriculum leads to a fragmented world. And a fragmented world loses much of its meaningfulness and coherence. The result is yet another dichotomy, namely, the separation between the meaning of the various subjects taught and the meaning of the students’ lives. Consequently, in schools students live two lives, sometimes referred to as the life of the classroom and the life of the hallways and lockers. For many students classroom learning has no connection to what they do outside of school. At the college and university level there is usually little improvement. On the contrary, at higher education levels students are encouraged at an early stage to specialize. Thus the focus is even further narrowed, and the fullness of life—to be displayed in a Christian curriculum—is even further reduced. Specialized majors become the avenue to life after graduation, while general education courses are regarded as mere hoops and hurdles to be jumped through and over in order to obtain a diploma.

Of course, schools have attempted and continue to attempt to offset this curricular fragmentation by introducing integrated course offerings, some team teaching, a thematic unit here and there, a theme week, or a general orientation course. But usually

these efforts are only peripheral to the heart of the curriculum. Disciplinary fragmentation remains firmly entrenched.

The fragmented curriculum contributes to the notion that philosophy and history are isolated, unrelated subjects, of interest to philosophers and historians but not to teachers who are daily under pressure to make immediate classroom management decisions. The leisure of foundational reflection, as a subject, seems far removed from a hectic classroom full of rowdy kids!

Conclusion and Recommendations

Our intellectual heritage, the effects of pragmatism, and the curriculum we have experienced in our own schooling make it very difficult to live integrated lives. The history of fragmentation is so long and so pervasive that no simple set of solutions can be offered. Only a general change in direction can be suggested. The following areas merit particular attention.

(1) Christian schools must do more to introduce an integrated curriculum. There is, of course, a place for focused study of disciplines and skills. But such focused study must take place within the context of coherence and integration. After all, we confess that we live in a God-ordered, coherent creation. Whatever fragmentation we introduce must be offset by equally strong efforts to provide students with a sense of coherence.¹² Our teachers must graduate from teacher education programs with a sense of integrality—also between theory and practice—instead of with a bagful of dichotomies and polarizations.

(2) Christian schools must increase their efforts to link “academics” with student life. Old distinctions between “curricular,” “extracurricular,” and “cocurricular” must be reexamined. The recent history of stressing “relevance” in education should not be summarily dismissed as an ancient relic of secular progressivism.

(3) Teacher education programs must make greater efforts to wean students away from their belief that the only good education is the subject-centered education with which they have become all too familiar.

(4) Philosophy of education must be renewed and revitalized. Christian philosophers of education should team together to rethink the issues which confront our teachers in their classrooms.

(5) The Christian community, including the church, must put more stress on our calling to walk closely with the Lord. Only when we are in close step with the Spirit (Gal. 5:25) can we overcome the dichotomies, break the power of pragmatism, and become whole people (both in and out of the classroom).

These recommendations bring us back to the question with which we began: What is the purpose of Christian education? Yes, Christian schools must train for knowledgeable and competent discipleship. But can we really do so if we ourselves perpetuate fragmentation and dichotomies? Are we ourselves at root not perpetuating a dualism when, for example, we confess that God's world is a unified whole while at the same time we teach disconnected subjects? Clearly, if we do not take more seriously our task to equip our students (and our future teachers) to live whole lives, in community and with the Lord, the gap between Christian philosophy and classroom practice can only widen.

END NOTES

- 1 Eph. 4:11-13
- 2 Cf. J. Van Dyk, *The Beginning of Wisdom: The Nature and Task of the Christian School* (Grand Rapids, MI: CSI Publications, 1985).
- 3 Beginning, section 2: ". . . [T]he Christian school rejects the dualistic view that human life is divided into two separate, mutually exclusive realms—a spiritual realm of religion and morals where God's Word can be heard, and a secular realm of independent science and reason to which the Word of God has nothing to say. The Bible makes it clear that God's Word and Spirit speak to and require response from the *whole* of life (Acts 17:28). As a result, the difference between a Christian and non-Christian school is to be found not just in additional religious activities, moral teachings, or biblical studies, but in the curriculum, in instruction, in parent-teacher relations—in all of its operations. The Christian school approaches every part of its task from a biblical perspective."
- 4 For a powerful description of how similar Christian schools are to public schools in structure and educational programs, see Gloria Goris Stronks and Doug Blomberg, eds., *A Vision With a Task: Christian Schooling for Responsive Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993) 42-46.
- 5 In this article I am not concerned about the distinctions between (a) philosophy, (b) worldview, and (c) foundations.

These terms, of course, are by no means synonyms. I treat these terms loosely as belonging to a common category to be contrasted with the category of "practice."

- 6 For an attempt to trace out this situation in greater detail, see my essay "The Relationship Between Faith and Action: An Introduction." *Pro Rege*, Vol. X, No. 4, 1982, pp. 2-7.
- 7 Doug Blomberg, "Toward a Christian Theory of Knowledge." *No Icing on the Cake* (Melbourne: Brookes-Hall Publishers, 1980) 41-60. Reprinted in D. Oppewal, ed., *Voices from the Past: Reformed Educators* (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin College, 1992) 185-192; H. Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).
- 8 Note that pragmatism does not do away with "reflection." John Dewey, for example, argued that "reflective thinking" is necessary is we are to cope with the changes of life. See Stuart Fowler's discussion on this point in *Issues in the Philosophy of Education* (Potchefstroom: Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1980) 32-36. Fowler explains: "The intellect, which is just the habit of reflective thinking, confronted with an obstacle to impulse, reflects on the situation and on possible solutions, selects one of these hypothetical solutions and tests it for usefulness, and continues the process, if necessary, until a satisfactory solution is found and impulse flows freely again in spontaneous expression. A satisfactory solution is one that works, and the best solution is the one that works best, not just in the immediate situation, but in the total context of man's life in society."
- 9 Jeannie Oakes, *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) 27. Quoted in Stronks and Blomberg, eds., *A Vision*, 56.
- 10 This is evident, for example, when we consider the standard curricular division into "humanities" and the "natural sciences." This curricular distinction is nothing more than a reflection of 19th-century neo-positivist philosophy which postulated an encyclopedia of the sciences based on the view that reality consists of mind and matter. German neo-positivism, consequently, spoke of Geisteswissenschaften (the sciences dealing with the "mind") and Naturwissenschaften (the sciences focusing on "matter").
- 11 For further discussion of this point, see my articles "Building a Curriculum with a Kingdom Vision" (93-115) and "Towards a Basic Framework for a Christian General Education Curriculum" (171-189) in *To Prod the "Slumbering Giant"* (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1972), as well as "A Key Component of a Christian College Curriculum" (99-113) in *Building the House: Essays on Christian Education*, J. De Jong and L. Van Dyke, eds. (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 1981).
- 12 A helpful discussion of the nature and implementation of an "integral curriculum" can be found in G. Stronks and D. Blomberg, *A Vision*, chapters 6-10.