

**Lecture #4: “The Role of Parents, Educators,
and the School Community”**
Delivered by Annemarie Roeper at The Roeper School
October 30, 1995

Lori Zinser (Roeper staff): We want to thank Annemarie for all that she has done while she was here for four weeks. She gave this series of four lectures, she met with several students and many parents and educators. She taught Stage IV kids. She taught an ethics class to MS students called “What Would You Do If?” And she taught an US psychology class that 38 kids signed up for, teaching it three blocks a day. So she has been very busy and we are very grateful.

Annemarie Roeper: This is the last of four sessions, as all of you know. I am pleased to see such a large attendance. As one does when you look back over something you’ve done, I’ve been thinking back over these three sessions I’ve done so far and the last one that is going to happen. They are sort of sequential, and as I look at them, I get the same impression that I always do, mainly that I have just touched the surface. I really couldn’t go into the depth each of these areas brings with them.

The first one, the philosophy of the school and the psychological background to it, is really a summation of sixty years of work. It occurred to me that it really isn’t possible to put into a speech like this all the many, many details that happen within the framework. Every single day you are confronted with philosophical decisions. Are you going to decide about certain children? (This is one of the superficial ones.) Are you going to take the child whose parents are more able to make a donation to the school more than another one? Are you going to decide between the needs of two children? One of the things I never did bring out is that it seems to happen that the focus is always on different areas and different times. In the 60 years the focus has gone from different things, from the open classroom to a very rigid education. It’s all been in there.

One of the decisions you have to make is whether you consider the needs of the child or the adult. Do you consider the needs of the teacher or the expectations of the superintendent or do you consider the needs of the child? I have had many discussions with people about the fact that I think they are all equally important. Some people say you don’t need to consider the needs of the teacher; the child is the most important. Everything depends on each other. You have to think of the needs of the teachers just as much. For an administrator, everyone – even the parents – has equal basic rights no matter who they are. That’s my opinion. If you try to live according to those rules you have many difficult ethical decisions to make almost daily. The richness of that life, the experiences of living within that kind of philosophy, is something you can’t really paint.

Well, maybe you can *paint* it, but I can't describe it in all its depth and details. So I felt that I gave you just a little of that.

The next one was the discussion of the lifeline that exists between the young child, any child, and the parent and the importance of this relationship. That's another thing that I feel I only touched on the surface. I gave you the framework, but I couldn't give you what that means in daily decisions, in daily relationships, in daily moments of love and also anger. The whole richness of life is impossible to describe. What I gave was only the outline within which I hope this happens. I also didn't really include that this relationship to parents stretches beyond the relationship with parents and children. It includes the home front. The home gets endowed with what happens between children and parents. You can go into any home and you can almost tell what the relationship is like – what kind of feelings are in it, what kind of atmosphere is in there. But I haven't been able to describe this. What I've been trying to do is just tell you what needs to be within this relationship. But also one needs to know how important these things are. A place to live for a child is of enormous importance. If a family moves, very often there is a reaction, a kind of insecurity, in the children. It is also something we need to keep remembering. It's the relationship itself and everything that surrounds it. What I want to say is that I just gave you the framework, but there are many principles and areas that deserve discussion, but that would be a year's course and not just four sessions.

The same is true, of course, in the next one, the relationships between teacher and child and school and child. Again my point was that whatever happens needs to function within an accepting relationship between teacher and children. The details of it, the flavor of it, I felt I couldn't explain to the extent that is really necessary.

What I want to talk about today is in a way also an extension of what we have talked about before. Again this is almost a richer subject than all the others and I know I won't be able to cover it all. I believe one of the major needs for gifted children – and all children and all adults -- is a supportive community — a community in which the child can really express their own agenda and yet is surrounded by other supportive people, and at the same time this community brings the limits to the expression of the child. It is a difficult subject for me to talk about because I feel that what one needs ... The world consists of communities all over the world, but most of them have a different structure than the one I think one should surround children with, and surround adults with. This leads me away from the psychological area that I discussed before and brings me back into the philosophical because I feel we really haven't made decisions about what kind of world we want to surround the child with.

We know the gifted child really is a global thinker. What they want is to understand the world as a whole. That's one of the reasons why they aren't interested in the details of skill learning because they are driven to have an overall concept. They are interested in dinosaurs and death; they are interested in where we come from; in

birth, not only because of the sexual aspects of it but because they need to know where we've come from; where we are going; and what is this whole mysterious world all about. And what we have not done for ourselves is to define this mysterious world and so what kind of community we offer these children has not been thought about that much by adults. We think as adults in more linear way of thinking, reaching some kind of goal.

Today I talked to a little girl who wanted to know about Roeper. I spent quite a lot of time with her. She wanted to know all the details. I asked her, "Where should I start?" and she said, "Start at the beginning." So I tried to tell her as much as I could about it. I went as far as I thought I could. Then I said, "Well now, is there anything else that you would like to know?" And she said, "Yes, I would like to know the ending." But I think that's the way children think. That's why they are interested in death and why they want to have an overall understanding.

What I want to do now is tell you in general what a community should be like and then go back to what our purpose was in designing the Roeper community. What I'm going to talk about tonight goes into basic philosophical problems because we live in a world that is based totally on a hierarchal concept. The idea that in competition there is a top and a bottom and that the bottom is there to serve the top and that you can reach the top. The whole society is structured according to that. Winning is the goal. In winning over others, we are putting down others. When teams win, we are putting down other teams. And that is really the way we look at the world.

Gifted children often think in different terms. I think in different terms. I think that this point of view is what leads us to the problems we have. I think that the reality is that the world is totally interdependent. We all know this, but nobody acts accordingly. That brings with it all sorts of other areas, for instance that the end doesn't justify the means because the means have a life of their own. For instance, if we try to raise our children in a punitive manner, we raise children who are very angry children, but we might get them to be able to sit still at the table for a long time, or to come in on time, or whatever it is our goals are. The concept of interdependence is sort of in opposition to the survival of the fittest because I feel the fittest could not survive without others. There is really a total interdependence. Again this is one of those things that one can say, but when it comes to the details, we can't think along those lines. But everything does depend on each other.

Children, gifted children particularly, seem to be interested in this. For them it is not a difficult concept to understand. It is something they often understand when they're younger, and then later on, we move them out of this because society doesn't allow them to think in such terms. But we have tried to carry this out within the Roeper community, where children understand that they can participate in decision-making, that they're listened to, but also that they need to listen to others. Actually, in a small community it is a world in miniature. The same kind of patterns that exist in the whole

world repeat themselves in the small community. You can see that when you act a certain way, certain consequences happen.

But in fact, there is not just one cause and one effect. There are many causes and many effects. I usually try to compare it with a drop of water that falls into a puddle. It makes a whole circle. It doesn't just create one area. That's what happens with everything we do. You can see it in a small community. I think one could teach it much more than we do. I think it can be taught in almost any subject matter. You can make it linear or you can make it circular. You can teach history in that way. You can teach almost all of the sciences that way. And, by the way, this desire of the child to have an overall idea of what this world is like is what leads them into trying to understand science, trying to understand history, trying to read the literature, trying to understand math – all of that shows them certain patterns. These patterns give them an overview of the world. And if you look at these patterns, you see that everything is totally interdependent.

I've often thought we should really base teaching on these concepts. So that from the beginning one can see this interdependence, and you would do things totally different. I used to teach social studies to very young children — age 4 and 5. I did it in a way totally different than it is usually done. I started with the world, the globe. The modern child would know about that. We would talk about how people live in China and live on the other side of the world and how they are different and also how they are the same. How they all need to eat, they all have emotions and so on. For young children, to start that way gives them an overall view, the global idea, and then you should talk about the grocery story. Usually we start with the grocery store because we think that is what they can understand but that doesn't give them a framework. I am always looking for the framework. I used to teach also for very young children physical science. We started out with the three states of matter rather than specific kinds of things. That can be taught just as easily as other things. You can also think of these things in the daily interaction among groups of children and within a community.

I don't think I told you this example yet. Quite a few years ago we had a substitute teacher who didn't know how Roeper functions. She didn't know that the students call their teachers by their first names and also that there is quite a bit of freedom and interchange of ideas. These were five-year-old children. This teacher just got off on the wrong foot with them. She came to me and said that she was leaving in the middle of the day. She said the children were so terrible that she wasn't going to finish out the day. I asked her what they were doing. She said they are acting like animals. They're acting like babies and like animals. They're crawling all around the room. I went back to talk to the children. I saw that they were doing exactly what she said they were doing. So I talked to them, and they said they were asking her questions and calling her by her first name, which we thought we were supposed to do, and she said we were acting like animals and babies. And so that's what they did.

I was stuck. She wanted to leave and I didn't quite know what to do. I didn't do what I think another principal would have done and that is to immediately say it is was all their fault. It is true the children misbehaved, but there was some real reason behind it. So I explained to them that I didn't think they were acting right, but I could understand what was happening. But the situation was that their teacher wasn't there was because she was attending a performance of her daughter at the Upper School, which was very important for her to be there and for her daughter for her to be there. I explained to them if I need to ask your teacher to come back right now, then she will not be happy. She will not be happy with you. The daughter won't like it and it will really have destroyed what is important. And it will come back to you in some way.

The reason I tell the story is because one can really look at the interdependence and really talk about how things are always belonging together and how the world functions that way. And they understood this. I think we don't do this very much. It is a different way of looking at things. It requires a structure that is not a hierarchal one, one that allows people to participate in decision-making – including children.

The way we really arrived at this was when we turned the school into a school for gifted children. Later on we realized that these children were being educated in a structure that was a traditional one. They were sitting at desks and learning the regular program in an accelerated way but they didn't have more participation and more ability to participate. I kept thinking that we were not keeping our promise to them. We weren't really giving them what children really should have. I was looking around for a long time to see what kind of structure we could offer them that would allow them to express their feelings and participate in the decisions. We learned about the English Open Classroom approach and adapted that. That's why we started the different kind of levels we have, the Stages. We developed a way in which children participated in decision-making in the classroom and also within school meetings so that they really could see the impact they were making and see how important they were, that their ideas and feelings were heard and understood and included in our decision-making.

From there we came to realize that the teachers were still functioning in the hierarchal fashion because the teachers were involved in a system where all the decisions were made at the top. Teachers began to participate in all decisions that affected them. Our thinking was that people should participate in decision-making that affects them. Children can do this at a certain point, and when they reach that point then one should include them so they learn how to make these decisions. That is also one reason why we have Free Choice in the Lower School – so they can learn about making decisions in terms of their own (lives) – but we also included children in processes where they could make proposals and could carry them out.

I remember a session where something was stolen. You can handle this by trying to find out who stole it and punish the person who did, or you can discuss it with the whole group and figure out what they think the reason is, what one should do about it.

We had the children who had things stolen from them explain to the other children what it meant to them so that there was always this understanding of the interdependence and also of the protectiveness, because behind it all was the feeling that we try to help each other. I think for these reasons that the community as much of a learning tool as anything else. We often think education takes place in the classroom only, but it takes place everywhere. There is the silent curriculum – the kind of things children are learning that we don't think they ought to be learning. I think that is a very big curriculum.

But in a school community, the kinds of things that go on within the school community are more important than what happens in the classroom. They should be applied to the classroom. The community becomes – if it is a supportive one – becomes another addition for the lifeline that I've been talking about. It creates a place where they belong, where they can feel at home, where there is no danger, but it is also the most difficult situation to maintain because there are all these interactions. There are certain children who maybe can't get along with each other. How do you help them to get along? It doesn't work to just say you have to play with each other. You have to think of the feelings that are there. I think that children often try to get along, but sometimes there are situations where they just can't. All of these things one has to help them with. It doesn't help just to say that you have to be good to everyone. It doesn't help to say that you aren't ever allowed to have a negative feeling. These feelings are there. What they need is to feel comfortable enough to express the negative feelings as well as the positive feelings. All of that needs a very carefully designed community. These things keep changing. At Roeper, new people come in and these things need to be rediscovered and redesigned, but the philosophy behind it should be to create a safe community within which the concerns can be expressed, which also serves as a starting point for all sorts of activities, for all sorts of relationships. It is very important for a pluralistic society that all people from all sorts of religions and backgrounds and different races and different sexual orientation – whatever it is – be accepted within our school as long as it is honest and openly expressed or known. It is very difficult. It is easy to say but enormously difficult. There always will be the moments when a child feels that he is an outcast, when a child feels the teacher doesn't understand him, when the teacher doesn't feel the children understand him.

All of these interactions need to be consciously thought about. I see this very much as part of the philosophy of the school but also particularly part of the needs of gifted children who in the outside world are so often loners. They need to have the experience of community support where they are accepted for who they are. Sometimes when they leave the school, they don't always find the same environment, but hopefully they can try to create it if they understand it. I feel that as soon as one starts talking about community, one goes beyond the school community or the place where children go to school, which includes the parents. In fact I was talking to someone yesterday who said that she feels that the school provides such a feeling of community that it really does take the place of what churches or synagogues provide for

people. I was very pleased to hear that. I think it is something that needs constant consciousness. I don't know how much we are all conscious of this aspect being as much a part of the personal development of the child as whatever the learning of the classroom is, of what college they are going to, whatever else they expect to happen in their life, if they have at least once in their life the feeling of really belonging.

I have been here for almost four weeks and have been gone from the school for 12 years. I am gratified to see how much this really does exist here, much of it is very unconsciously. I don't think people have thought about it in the way I'm trying to express it. But it is there and it gives people this lifeline, this security where they can feel that they are accepted for who they are. They don't have to prove who they are. I have heard students say that is what they felt here. They didn't have to first fit in, wear the right clothes and say the right things, but that they were really being accepted for who they are. That is of enormous importance. Many alumni think back to these days as something that was a continuing support for them.

I wasn't going to make this a speech in favor of Roeper, but as I'm thinking about it, it really is something that is a very important part of their education, even though probably while they are in it, they are thinking about learning certain things and extending their understanding. And of course, that is very important also.

This was once the only campus and then we added the Birmingham campus. Many students have told me how important the surroundings are. Again the same thing that I said before, the house gets imbued with whatever goes on inside with the relationship within the family. By the same token, people include the landscape around here as part of the Roeper atmosphere. That's why if there are ever thoughts of moving somewhere else, people react very strongly. I think it is beautiful but also because it has a long history. So many interactions have taken place here, and not all of them good. Sometimes negative things happen, but I think it (negative things) is also important. It wouldn't be right if everything was fine. We learn a great deal – just like the story where the children had trouble with their teacher – we learn as much from the negative than if everything had been a normal kind of procedure.

Now I think I'd like to ask you how you react to this and what it is you are thinking. Especially about the hierarchal aspect – seeing children not as one that is better than one another, but to see them as equally important and fitting into a cooperative kind of community. And yet I know that all of you live a life that is dominated by hierarchy. (General laughter.) You may ask, "How are they going to fit into a world that is so different?" I think this (experience of community) helps them fit into it but maybe it will help them change it.

Q: Taking off on what you said about the hierarchal experiences that we feel in our everyday life, what are your feelings about how to balance for a child some of the hierarchal activities he engages in, for example, like team sports?

AMR: I knew you were going to ask that one.

Q: It is a dichotomy for him to be able to change from one environment, which is pretty prescribed, and to be able to make that leap back and forth can be difficult.

AMR: That is a very good question, and a difficult one. What makes this a difficult question for me is because the team sports also create a community. It is a community against others, if you want to put it like that. I do feel that psychologically it is an important thing. It allows an expression of feelings. It is physically an important thing. It seems to me that sports are an area that is acceptable because it is a sport. It's not real life, in the same way. Just as children need to play games – I also think they need cooperative games – but a sport does not somehow seem to be a contradiction to this. Maybe that's a construct that allows me to be able to live with it, but I actually think it is also psychologically important.

Q: I think gifted children often need to win, to excel, and it's important to remember that, when you play a sport, you have a choice of how you will play the game: to bring out your best, to win at all costs, or to win by challenging yourself to work as a team, etc.

AMR: It doesn't really define you. I have talked to many children about this winning. It's like a debate, almost an intellectual exercise. I have a grandson who plays chess. He's very involved in this whole competitive activity. There are times that he lets the other person win because he could tell that it was more important for that person to win. That's also part of this interdependence. It is realizing that you have the power to help make another person feel this way.

Q: Can't gifted children reflect on the two environments and recognize that in a team sport the hierarchy is part of the game? I can almost see the child seeing it as all part of the game rather than seeing it as a model for real life.

AMR: I think they can do this without internalizing this. I think the real difficulties that come about involve the parents. That's always been something that is very hard for me to watch. When this child has to prove something for them, when the team becomes the parents' team, it has a different atmosphere.

Q: My son has always shied away from sports because of his perfectionism. When he came to Roeper, to be able to be told that there was Friday football, that everybody got to be on the team, boys and girls, he's very proud of the fact that everybody gets to play. He doesn't understand the game very well yet, but he sure feels part of the team. When we talk about children going into the outer world, or however you want to phrase it, I think these experiences have given him great courage to try something else, because of the loving – competitive but loving – atmosphere in which he could put his

foot in the water and try. In other arenas, it has been about survival of the fittest, and it's been wonderful to see that kind of love and support here.

AMR: No matter how involved they get in their teams and in their sport, it is important that they don't confuse it with the value of the individual, the the person who is not interested in sport, or the person who doesn't do well, isn't put down. I don't know if that is possible for children in the heat of the game, but the Roeper atmosphere really oughtn't to let that happen.

Q: As someone who has been involved in sports here for many years, I can say that historically, Roeper teams have been known for their good sportsmanship. But nothing is carved in stone. For that to continue to be true of Roeper it falls upon the leadership of the coaches and teachers. The message the kids get from the coaches and the parents will really affect how they play the game. I want to share two stories, one good and one bad.

I'll start with the good one. During one game, there were a lot of anti-Semitic comments from the other team, and at the end of the game, one of the other players came up to our team. He said to one of our players, "Are you Jewish?" Now, I happened to know that he wasn't but rather than take advantage of the out the other player was offering, he aligned himself with the team and said, "What difference would that make?" He leant his strength to the team and against the inherent wrongness of the situation. I want to say that subsequently there was a lot of follow-up. One coach called the school, apologies were made and there was a great deal done about it.

But I have a not-so-good story that I want to tell to caution parents of the younger children coming up. I was watching a soccer game and there were a lot of over-zealous parents. I don't know whose feet I'm going to step on, but I with you on this one, Annemarie. Fathers were saying, "Kill 'em, go get 'em." I turned to one of the fathers and said, "What are you saying? Listen to the words you are using!" And he turned to me, very patronizingly, and said, "Well, you just don't know the game." And I said, "No, you don't understand what Roeper is about." So you really have to be vigilant or what we pride ourselves can be undermined by either our own careless messages, or by not taking a stand when we hear something. I'm not saying, go out there and be a patsy, or lie down, or be a loser, but there's a line we have to be really clear about.

AMR: Now, let me say that Roeper is not the only place in the world that has a humanistic point of view, but this line is always there.

Q: This is just a warm fuzzy from the parents of the young children at Roeper. This is our first year, and my daughter had a swim party for her birthday. She invited her whole class, and most of them showed up, and some children from the neighborhood. And they were all getting along, but one of the games got a little out of hand. A couple of children got upset and I talked to them, and then I said to the whole group, some kids

are feeling like there isn't enough sharing going on. And immediately, they changed how they were playing. At the end of the party, the people who ran the facility said they had never seen a kinder, more polite group of little children. They didn't know about Roeper but when I told them, they said that that Roeper kids could come back any time.

Q: In response to your story about something being stolen, there are cards that the middle school kids are playing with right now, and they trade them among each other. This whole activity is only a little bit less important to them than world peace right now. My class today started with a very loud altercation between two students who had traded some cards. One demanded that he get his cards back because the other student had traded him counterfeit cards. A third student got involved, studying the card and announcing that it was obviously counterfeit.

I thought about how to handle this, and I decided the most important thing was for them to resolve this themselves. I offered them the choice: either put this aside till after school and settle it themselves, or the two could go down to the office and ask the director to mediate the problem. And the third kid, the one who had been egging them on and really creating the greatest uproar, immediately turned into the mediator and the issue was settled in about 80 seconds. And I credit this to the fact that these kids had all been at Roeper for several years, and they've had the ability to make decisions and make choices all along. It's very interesting to watch this work.

AMR: I think what also happens in many other schools is that this would not have happened in a classroom, the teacher wouldn't have known about it, and that all sorts of things go on in which the children are completely unprotected. I know this from what my grandchildren tell me, about situations in which they don't feel they can go to anyone. I think this whole matter of teachers and students being part of the same community, where in most schools, even the teacher will say, don't tattletale, and then the students are stuck without any guidance.

Q: How do you transition from Roeper to college? There are all kinds of colleges, of course, but what does Roeper do to help them make the transition?

A from audience member: (much inaudible) The most important thing is that we help the child decide what kind of college they want to be in.

AMR: At Roeper, they've learned that it is OK to be who they are, and when they go to colleges where everyone is different, they maintain their self-esteem. Also, at Roeper they have been around gifted students, and so when they go to college and encounter other gifted students, they are not overwhelmed by that.

A from audience member: My child just went off to college and I just want to say, they are so well-prepared in terms of time management.

A from audience member: My daughter is a sophomore and there was practically no adjustment. The other students really struggled with the time management thing because everything had been handed to them, but my daughter had had to be independent. And the other thing about a non-hierarchical environment, my daughter was in a class and the professor assigned a paper, and my daughter said to her friend, well, I really don't understand this so I'm going to ask the professor about it so I don't get started in the wrong direction. And her friend was aghast that she would say that to a professor, but she was so used to having a relationship with her teachers that she continued that at college. And the other thing my daughter used to say was that Roeper taught her to think.

AMR: That used to happen at the University of Michigan. They really wanted our students because they had a kind of security and maturity about themselves. But I know that sometimes they also get lonely, which happens to gifted children in schools and college.

Q: I think that what happens in the community, they realize their education is theirs, it's not something given to them by a teacher or put upon them by another structure, it's something of their own. By the time they get to the university, they take the power in whatever way is appropriate there. It's so wonderful to see how the structure is set up so the children are not aware of the structure, they are just aware of their freedom. When people say to me that Roeper is unstructured, I say, no, there's a very strong structure there, it's just structured so the children have the freedom they are able to handle at that point developmentally.

AMR: In the end they realize they are in charge of their own lives.

Q: In response to some of your comments about community, what about some of the communities adults are setting up now, like gated communities with their own security, or like the Disney community that will be modeled after Disneyworld, a fantasy world where people will grow up always inside this fantasy world. Some people might say

that's not a bad thing, but....

AMR: I know exactly what you are saying, because some people say that Roeper is an island, a fantasy world, but the purpose is exactly the opposite. It's a realistic world, a world that understands that we are interdependent with everything. Those gated communities are doing the opposite. They are pretending they can close themselves off. Children notice those discrepancies. Where I live, there are homeless people everywhere, and children always notice that and ask me about it. The people in gated communities pretend they aren't there, but they (the homeless) need care, and if we don't care for them, they will get sick and we will get their germs. We need to be our brother's keepers, because they are our keepers and if we don't look after them, whatever happens to them will happen to us. I hope that this is something Roeper

people will understand, that we need to care for others not just for moral reasons but because we are connected.

Q: I'm worried about the apparent lifeline between gifted children and the information systems (computers) and that it may replace the lifelines between gifted children and real people.

AMR: I'm not sure what you're asking.

A (from audience): I teach computer science and I have noticed that gifted children can get very engaged in online relationships, maybe because they are shy and can't make relationships, or because they have a larger community in which to find compatible people. Is that a problem? It can be. There are pluses and minuses. Without the face-to-face contact, they aren't real relationships in many ways. On the other hand, computers offer a way to gain more information and meet more people.

AMR: And it is very important for gifted children to find compatible people.

Transcribed by Diana Elshoff and edited by Marcia Ruff, September 2009