CHILD PSYCHOLOGIST

JEAN PIAGET

He found the secrets of human learning and knowledge hidden behind the cute and seemingly illogical notions of children

BY SEYMOUR PAPERT

Jean Piaget, the pioneering Swiss philosopher and psychologist, spent much of his professional life listening to children, watching children and poring over reports of researchers around the world who were doing the same. He found, to put it most succinctly, that children don’t think like grownups. After thousands of interactions with young people often barely old enough to talk, Piaget began to suspect that behind their cute and seemingly illogical utterances were thought processes that had their own kind of order and their own special logic. Einstein called it a discovery “so simple that only a genius could have thought of it.”

Piaget’s insight opened a new window into the inner workings of the mind. By the end of a wide-ranging and remarkably prolific research career that spanned nearly 75 years—from his first scientific publication at age 10 to work still in progress when he died at 84—Piaget had developed several new fields of science: developmental psychology, cognitive theory and what came to be called genetic epistemology. Although not an educational reformer, he championed a way of thinking about children that provided the foundation for today’s education-reform movements. It was a shift comparable to the displacement of stories of “noble savages” and “cannibals” by modern anthropology. One might say that Piaget was the first to take children’s thinking seriously.

"[He is] one of the two towering figures of 20th century psychology."

JEROME BRUNER, Founder of the Harvard Center for Cognitive Studies

Others who shared this respect for children—John Dewey in the U.S., Maria Montessori in Italy and Paulo Freire in Brazil—fought harder for immediate change in the schools, but Piaget’s influence on education is deeper and more pervasive. He has been revered by generations of teachers inspired by the belief that children are not empty vessels to be filled with knowledge (as traditional pedagogical theory had it) but active builders of knowledge—little scientists who are constantly creating and testing their own theories of the world. And though he may not be as famous as Sigmund Freud or even B.F. Skinner, his contribution to psychology may be longer lasting. As computers and the Internet give children greater autonomy to explore ever larger digital worlds, the ideas he pioneered become ever more relevant.

BORN Aug. 9, 1896, in Switzerland
1907 Publishes first paper at age 10
1918 Obtains doctorate in zoology, studies psychoanalysis
1920 Studies children’s intelligence in Paris
1923 First of nearly 60 scholarly books published
1929 Appointed director, International Bureau of Education
1955 Establishes Center for Genetic Epistemology
1980 Dies in Geneva
Piaget grew up near Lake Neuchâtel in a quiet region of French Switzerland known for its wines and watches. His father was a professor of medieval studies and his mother a strict Calvinist. He was a child prodigy who soon became interested in the scientific study of nature. When, at age 10, his observations led to questions that could be answered only by access to the university library, Piaget wrote and published a short note on the sighting of an albino sparrow in the hope that this would influence the librarian to stop treating him like a child. It worked. Piaget was launched on a path that would lead to his doctorate in zoology and a lifelong conviction that the way to understand anything is to understand how it evolves.

After World War I, Piaget became interested in psychoanalysis. He moved to Zurich, where he attended Carl Jung's lectures, and then to Paris to study logic and abnormal psychology. Working with Théodore Simon in Alfred Binet’s child psychology lab, he noticed that Parisian children of the same age made similar errors on true-false intelligence tests. Fascinated by their reasoning processes, he began to suspect that the key to human knowledge might be discovered by observing how the child’s mind develops.

Back in Switzerland, the young scientist began watching children play, scrupulously recording their words and actions as their minds raced to find reasons for why things are the way they are. In one of his most famous experiments, Piaget asked children, “What makes the wind?” A typical Piaget dialogue:

Piaget: What makes the wind?
Julia: The trees.
P: How do you know?
J: I saw them waving their arms.
P: How does that make the wind?
J (waving her hand in front of her face):
Like this. Only they are bigger. And there are lots of trees.
P: What makes the wind on the ocean?
J: It blows there from the land. No. It’s the waves...

Piaget recognized that five-year-old Julia’s beliefs, while not correct by any adult criterion, are not “incorrect” either. They are entirely sensible and coherent within the framework of the child’s way of knowing. Classifying them as “true” or “false” misses the point and shows a lack of respect for the child. What Piaget was after was a theory that could find in the wind dialogue coherence, ingenuity and the practice of a kind of explanatory principle (in this case by referring to body actions) that stands young children in very good stead when they don’t know enough or have enough skill to handle the kind of explanation that grownups prefer.

Piaget was not an educator and never enunciated rules about how to intervene in such situations. But his work strongly suggests that the automatic reaction of putting the child right may well be abusive. Practicing the art of making theories may be more valuable for children than achieving meteorological orthodoxy; and if their theories are always greeted by “Nice try, but this is how it really is...” they might give up after a while on making theories. As Piaget put it, “Children have real understanding only of that which they invent themselves, and each time that we try to teach them something too quickly, we keep them from reinventing it themselves.”

Disciples of Piaget have a tolerance for—indeed a fascination with—children’s primitive laws of physics: that things disappear when they are out of sight; that the sun is where you are; that big things float and small things sink. Einstein was especially intrigued by Piaget’s finding that seven-year-olds insist that going faster can take more time—perhaps because Einstein’s own theories of relativity ran so contrary to common sense.

Although every teacher in training memorizes Piaget’s four stages of childhood development (sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, formal operational), the better part of Piaget’s work is less well known, perhaps because schools of education regard it as “too deep” for teachers. Piaget never thought of himself as a child psychologist. His real interest was epistemology—the theory of knowledge—which, like physics, was considered a branch of philosophy until Piaget came along and made it a science.

Piaget explored a kind of epistemological relativism in which multiple ways of knowing are acknowledged and examined nonjudgmentally, yet with a philosopher’s analytic rigor. Since Piaget, the territory has been widely colonized by those who write about women’s ways of knowing, Afrocenric ways of knowing, even the computer’s ways of knowing. Indeed, artificial intelligence and the information-processing model of the mind owe more to Piaget than its proponents may realize.

The core of Piaget is his belief that looking carefully at how knowledge develops in children will elucidate the nature of knowledge in general. Whether this has in fact led to deeper understanding remains, like everything about Piaget, controversial. In the past decade Piaget has been vigorously challenged by the current fashion of viewing knowledge as an intrinsic property of the brain. Ingenious experiments have demonstrated that newborn infants already have some of the knowledge that Piaget believed children constructed. But for those, like me, who still see Piaget as the giant in the field of cognitive theory, the difference between what the baby brings and what the adult has is so immense that the new discoveries do not significantly reduce the gap but only increase the mystery.

M.I.T. professor Seymour Papert, creator of the Logo computer language, worked with Piaget in Geneva