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As is the Sapling, So Grows the Tree: The Importance of Early Care

Roberto E. Bahruth
Boise State University

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Robert Bahruth
Boise State University, U.S.A.

Abstract

All education is political and the ways children are educated early in life has a strong influence on them throughout their adult experience. Examples of these influences are provided from past generations with an argument to address the speed-of-light living of the generation of the microchip world of today's modern society. Children growing up with electronics and with little tolerance for down time crave constant stimulation. They are living a fundamentally different childhood, disconnected from nature's metaphors. Reflective time, quiet time, time spent getting lost in a book are being replaced by microtexting, emails, instant messaging, and cell phone conversations mostly about trivia. Educators must recognize the damaging effects of such a media-dominated lifestyle and provide deliberate pedagogical spaces to balance human development towards healthy adult living.

Key words: Froebel, Montessori, Kindergarten, Einstein, developmentally

I would like to begin my talk with a fable I have enjoyed from the time I first heard it told. It will help us all to appreciate the purpose of our gathering.

1. Conference of the Walking Birds

Once upon a time an entire population of birds had forgotten how to fly. So they walked everywhere, generation after generation. Every one complained about sore feet and how long it took to go anywhere. Finally, one bright bird made the suggestion that they bring in an expert for a weekend long conference on flying. They found such an expert and soon the arrangements were made at a beautiful hotel on a mountaintop. The expert arrived and all joined in singing such lovely songs as "We can fly, we can fly." They sat and went through the motions, flapping their wings to the instructions of the expert. At the end of the conference, they were all led to the hotel terrace and encouraged to follow the expert as he jumped off and flew around and around. First, only the bravest among them followed, but eventually all were encouraged and took the leap of faith. For an hour they all rode the thermals and glided through the air. Some even sang with delight the songs they had learned. Finally, one by one, they landed on the terrace and took their seats for the closing ceremony. Awards were handed out and praise was heaped upon the expert. After saying farewell, all the birds then walked home.

El jardinero no enseña a la rosa a ser rosa, sino procura las condiciones máximas para que la rosa realice su potencial innato.*

The gardener does not produce the rose. He or she provides the optimal conditions for the rose within the seed to become the flower it was always meant to be.

Metaphors stand as incredible pedagogical tools when carefully selected and thoughtfully employed. Paulo Freire kept his metaphors in two categories throughout his writing and I try to do the same. He used mechanical metaphors to deride practices in schools that are antipedagogical and go against the natural ways in which human beings learn. The idea of a gardener that I employ above is an organic metaphor expressing a healthy approach to human development. It relates back to Froebel's idea of Kindergarten, which has been lost over the centuries through its routine application to name a grade level in school. The original thoughtfulness that produced the term has evaporated and needs to be revisited. Notice first, that the word retains its original German spelling with a "t" instead of the English "d". This is a linguistic, historical footprint that is indelible.

Contemplating Froebel's metaphor of kindergarten, (a garden of and for children), and extending the metaphor to the obligations of the gardener, allows us to see the challenges we face as we try to meet the needs of each and every learner. In a garden, we find a variety of plants that require differing amounts of care, space, water, sunlight, fertilizer, etc. If we were to treat all of the plants in the same way, some might prosper, but others would not have the maximum conditions necessary to prosper to their full potential.

Let's make the example even more extreme. If we were to take two seeds from the same plant and abandon one in the hostile conditions of a desert, and then take the second seed home to plant in the carefully prepared, fertile soil of our garden, we know what will occur. The one seed is tossed carelessly and forgotten, while the second one is watched over and cared for in developmentally appropriate ways. At the end of the growing season the seed in our garden has flourished and bears fruit. The seed that got no care is withered and fruitless if it has survived at all. One might conclude, as often happens in schools, that one seed was just a bad seed. I would assert that the problem is with the garden and the gardener.

This leads us to a critical question that must be addressed if we care about children and our future at all. What are the maximum conditions and whom should we entrust to create them?

I recognize two pedagogical challenges depending on the age of the learners and how much schooling they have received. (I choose the word "receive" deliberately, since it implies a one-way system delivered to the learner rather than working with children as a community of learners. "Community" should also be appreciated as an organic metaphor. In contrast, Freire used the term "banking" to denounce the depositing of bits of identical, skill-driven knowledge in the heads of all learners regardless of individual differences. Banking correlates nicely with a capitalist economic system that views humans as resources. A schooling system based on economics reproduces the class biases of the surrounding society. A democratic, humanistic educational experience would value each child as unique and help each child to grow in developmentally appropriate ways. *The fact that we need to explicitly add words like "democratic" and "humanistic" to education demonstrates how far we have strayed from true education in the first place.*

Humanizing education then, attempts to keep alive the natural curiosity of young learners as the teacher helps them to transform it into an epistemological curiosity (Freire 1998). A teacher might notice something the child appears interested in and direct the young learner to sources of information and exploration of the subject. This is a way of fueling the child's interest and maintaining an organic quality to learning. In Spanish the folk wisdom expresses the notion in this way: "Dónde hay interés, hay aprendizaje" (Where there is interest, there is learning).

For older learners who have been heavily schooled and damaged by false representations of how human beings come to know and understand the world around them, humanizing education must deliberately make the effort to include the subjectivities of learners in the process. One of the most damaging effects of banking is the way in which static, official bodies of knowledge are transmitted "objectively" to all learners in like fashion. This leads to an undermining of the learners' confidence in their ability to contribute to the making of knowledge, since the message has been consistently delivered that the information in the text is paramount, and what learners know about the world is inconsequential. Notice the preference for factual recall questions in basal schemes to "teach" reading. Rare are the questions of invitation that require the student to use tacit knowledge to bring personal meanings to texts. A deliberate pedagogical effort requires the teacher to undo the damage that has left learners in a literal rather than literate state of mind.

The goal of producing independent, lifelong learners requires educators to avoid inflicting damage upon younger learners through banking, and to help deskilled, older learners to reinvest their humanity in the learning process. The pound of cure is more difficult than the ounce of prevention, but each role requires scholarship and deep understanding of natural epistemological processes. Understanding the immorality of damaging learners is also required to foster a commitment to a humanizing pedagogy.

Humanistic education provides the promise, but does not guarantee, that learners aspire toward the higher expressions of our intellectual capabilities, rather than gravitating to more antagonistic and antihuman expressions of ignorance and the accompanying "isms" of gender, race, and class. Pearl S. Buck described being in the company of leading scholars in New York City:

Meanwhile, I like very much to be in the company of the learned, deservedly or not. They are truly learned men and therefore without conceit and bombast. They are simple in manner, kind and mildly humorous, and they are careful not to wound one another. This is because they are civilized as learning alone can civilize the human being (1954:388).

Dispositions toward lifelong learning are also fostered through the return to meaningful learning experiences. The humanistic traits of the scholars Buck describes should be among the most meaningful goals of educators. I have long said that all of the greedy, dishonest, and violent people among us share in common the fact that they all went to school. As they were busied with skill, drill and kill worksheets and banking they also failed to learn the humanistic elements of education. I have stated elsewhere that if you have a greedy, ruthless, dishonest person and you teach him a second language, now he can screw over two populations of people instead of just one! They learned to compete, to defeat, to conquer, and to cheat, all quite well. Even if the heavily schooled only learn to hate learning, or to avoid learning and literacy, the lesson will have a devastating effect on the quality of life they experience. What is it

about today's schooling tradition and the popular culture children are bombarded with that numbs the imagination, as it shapes their sexuality, and their humanity? The pound of cure necessary to undo the damage is abundantly evident when we ask thoughtful questions of older learners who have been heavily schooled through banking. This is especially so with students who have received good grades for providing the official right answers and conforming to the demands of schooling without question. The anecdote I now wish to share illustrates this point.

2. Lifelong Learner

“Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.”

Thomas Alva Edison

Many years ago, in the 1940's, in Princeton, New Jersey, the famous physicist, Albert Einstein conducted research and taught on the campus of Princeton University. He was famous around the world for his contributions to theoretical physics, but he also wrote extensively on philosophy and the meaning of life. Einstein often dressed in modest clothes and wore moth-eaten sweaters. His gray hair was usually all messed up as he spent more time grooming his mind rather than grooming his head. Many photos of Einstein can be seen in offices with quotes from his writings on the meaning of life and the politics of the world of ideas. His image is easily recognized by most people around the world. Many anecdotes are told about incidents in the life of this famous man, and this is one I heard when I was growing up just twenty-five miles north of Princeton.

One afternoon Albert Einstein left his office deep in thought as he strolled across the beautiful campus of Princeton University. He wanted to have a bite to eat and was looking for a restaurant downtown, just across from the campus. When he arrived at the restaurant, he entered and seated himself at a quiet table in a corner. He took out some papers and a pencil and began to work on some complicated mathematical problems.

Soon after, a young waitress came over and handed Einstein a menu. He looked it over and ordered a sandwich and a cup of tea. Then, instead of leaving, the waitress struck up a conversation with Einstein.

Waitress: You look very interesting. What are you working on?

Einstein: I'm trying to solve a problem in mathematics.

Waitress: Really? What do you do for a living?

Einstein: I study physics.

Waitress: Oh. I finished that last year.

Einstein: I see.

The waitress then left to place his order and he continued with his work. However, he had trouble concentrating because he found the girl's answer somewhat disturbing. What is it about modern education that leaves a beginning student with the false sense of having finished a subject, after simply taking one class? What is the driving force behind the lifelong discipline of a scholar?

I end this piece with questions emblematic of a critical pedagogical approach that invites learners to explore the deeper meanings of a short anecdote, a song, a movie, or a television commercial in relation to their own lives. Rather than looking for text-driven, official right answers, these questions create dialectical engagements with stories from the many perspectives of the learners. What might amaze many is that young children readily embrace these invitations to explore the stories we share with them. For example, children have been quick to recognize that Little Red Riding Hood is a tale that insults their intelligence because it should be easy to tell the difference between a wolf and a grandmother. Critical questioning can lead young children to dispositions to go beyond text and to read critically for conflicting messages between the word and what they know about the world.

Parents can easily learn to ask questions that invite children to the events and texts of their lives to prepare them in the literate skills needed for such encounters. Referring back to earlier stories or events is another way to help learners to make connections with previous learning. Questions that promote this ask: Does this story remind you of any others we have talked about? How are the stories similar? Different? This represents an ounce of prevention that prepares the learners for meaningful engagement and involvement in their own learning. Parents can be made aware of the power of language to create dispositions and to plant wisdom in the tender minds of their children. Haven't we all had an occasion to remember something that our mother or father told us when we were young and finally, years later, understood what they meant? Speaking the language of possibility, parents can also encourage their children to dream big. One thing I have come to appreciate over the years is that no one can predict or know how far into the future their words and deeds will travel. I see it as a ripple effect in a pond. Positive or negative, the ever-widening circles spread far beyond our ability to notice. A bad day at work may come home to haunt the household. Those around us are affected. Great thinkers may be long dead, but their words and deeds still travel across time and space to touch those who take the time to ponder their lives and thoughts.

We can look to what privileged class parents with consciousness provide for their children to get some ideas about how all parents can level the playing field through strategies within their reach. A second language is almost automatic for the privileged class. They send their children on foreign exchanges, semesters abroad, or summer vacations in Europe, etc. If your child's mother tongue is not English, keep talking to them in their mother tongue. English is guaranteed. Just look at children who have lived here their whole lives and cannot speak to their grandparents anymore. Our government is now, FINALLY, seeking native speakers of other languages for much needed translations. How many of them have, as Anzaldúa bemoans, "had their tongues yanked out" by English Only policies and subtractive schooling? They need not apply.

Let's look at some specific examples of simple actions by parents that have led to lifelong wellbeing in their children. Tiger Woods held a golf club from the time he could walk. Billy Cristal's parents would let him put on shows – and even filmed some of his performances-- in their living room when he was very small. So did the parents of Sammy Davis Junior. Barbara Streisand was encouraged to sing and perform early on. When she was twelve, she sang for the first time in public in New York City. Only four people sat in the audience and she was dismayed, but her father

told her to sing her heart out as though the place was packed. He told her, you never know who's in the audience. She did so and one of the four people was a talent scout and the rest is history. Ramón Ayala was given an old accordion when he was very young. Diego Rivera's father put boards up on the walls of their home to let Diego paint murals. Mozart was composing from a very young age. His compositions were not great yet, but none of these children were geniuses. They just got good gardening at an optimal time in their early lives. Then they dedicated the rest of their lives to perfecting their skills.

I wish to provide two more, little known examples, pointed out in the work of Eugene Provenzo. (He also testifies before congress on the hazards of raising children on video games). Both stories relate to my earlier reference to Froebel, the inventor of Kindergarten. When Frank Lloyd Wright and Buckminster Fuller were very young, their mothers bought them Froebel learning toys. Wright played with Froebel blocks and paper cuts. Every building he ever designed in his adult life, obeys the geometry of Froebel blocks and every stained glass window he ever created is clearly influenced by the paper cuts he did as a child. Buckminster Fuller, the inventor of the geodesic dome played with peas and toothpicks as a Froebel activity, forming them into triangles and building small structures. As an adult, the geodesic dome he created obeys the laws of this early activity designed by Froebel. None of Froebel's toys were elaborate or expensive. Imagination was not included, rather it was invited.

Pat Mora's children's book, *Tomás y la señora de la biblioteca* (available in English as well), also tells the story of Tomás Rivera, as a migrant child, who encounters kindness in a librarian who helps him to find books that interest him. She helps him to borrow the books and encourages him to read. Many years later, the library at The University of California is named after Tomás Rivera. Again we can see an example of how the humanity of the librarian carries far into the future.

Finally, Loren Eiseley, one of my favorite authors, tells how he hated to go home after school because his house was filled with yelling and screaming. He would seek refuge alongside a pond between home and school and spend long hours there contemplating the living creatures inhabiting this biological niche. He would observe carefully and draw and write in a notebook he kept. He tells of a crossroads in his life where he could become destructive or productive. His eighth grade English teacher took notice of his writings and told him he showed great promise as a nature writer. Her words helped him to make his decision and he went on to become one of the most celebrated authors of his day. He was also appointed to the position of provost at the University of Pennsylvania where he was a professor of paleontology.

As educators, and especially as parents who are the first teachers, we must be deliberate in the ways we attend to the seeds in our garden. As ye sow, so shall ye reap. Seeds depend upon gardeners, but so also gardeners eventually depend upon the fruit of their labor. As gardeners, our vision of the harvest should be bountiful from the day we prepare the soil and place the seed. Our duty is to protect the defenceless child from the designs of corporate schooling and media bombardment. Our calling is to keep curiosity alive and vibrant, and to prevent the dulling of the mind through monotony. And so colegas, fly with me. Let's choose not to walk home. Too much is at stake.

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