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KNOW THYSELF: THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMANISM IN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Current and past reforms have attempted to address the challenges of the educational world. There are undoubtedly reasons for concern as illiteracy and high school dropout rates are still haunting figures in the United States (Institute of Education Sciences, 2010; National Assessment of Literacy, 2010). Thus, the need for improvement in the U.S. educational system is undeniable. However, education without true appreciation for the uniqueness of each and every individual is an empty endeavor. An important lesson can be learned from international experiences and the classical tradition of humanism.

INTRODUCTION

A Nation at Risk, No Child Left Behind, and Race to the Top have become familiar terminology in the United States' education field. Students in this country seem to struggle academically in many different ways. All these initiatives have the declared intent to "fix" whatever is wrong with education. Unfortunately, the issues in this field are hard to define and often become the center of heated debates and controversial proposals. Furthermore, deciding which educational practices are best suited to promote stronger academic performances is not easy. There are many approaches to education and infinite nuances within each approach. It appears that a common, general approach to support failing schools is to provide detailed, step-by-step, prescriptive instruction. Nevertheless, I contend that only a learner-centered, humanistic approach can provide an ideal learning environment for each and every student.

VIEWS ON LEARNING AND TEACHING

A basic assumption derived from the current literature and data is that students do not learn what they need to learn in school. Based on the statistics, illiteracy and high school dropout rates in the United States are alarming (Institute of Education Sciences, 2010; National Assessment of Literacy, 2010). Thus, there is a perceived need for instruction that is carefully planned with a very systematic structure and scripted lessons to ensure quality control. However, this approach, after almost a decade of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), has not produced the desired results. In fact, some data seem to suggest that such an approach may be counterproductive (Meier & Wood, 2004). By trying to simplify education and engineer it into a highly structured, mistake-proof endeavor, learners, as well as teachers, are denied their uniqueness and their own complexity as human beings.

Palmer (1997) maintains that teaching has three facets that cannot be overlooked. Of these three, the most relevant is that students are defined and shaped by their own complexity (p. 1). Of course, the complexity of the subject matter and the complexity of the teachers and mentors only add further richness to the overall picture. In Palmer's words, good teachers, the "weavers," do not follow the same instructional approaches (1997); on the contrary, they often vary significantly in everything that defines their teaching methods. More specifically, "the methods used by these weavers vary widely: lectures, Socratic dialogues, laboratory experiments, collaborative problem-solving, creative chaos" (p. 3); all of the good teachers, however, share a common trait: they display a "capacity for connectedness" (Palmer, 1997).

Drawing upon my personal experiences as a student in the Italian school system, I remember experiencing this connectedness firsthand when my high school Latin teacher spent an extensive amount of time during his breaks to discuss Hemingway's prose with me. Although as a high school first-year student, I had not been exposed to much literary criticism, there I was engaged in academic dialogue with an adult about a subject that had nothing to do with the day's topic or the school curriculum. I have since forgotten many of my high school lessons, but I will never forget those conversations. Later on, as a teacher, I realized that I could truly teach the students only when I was able to relate to them as people. According to Palmer (1997), this is a form of teaching that transcends technique and comes from the heart, "meaning 'heart' in its ancient sense, the place where intellect and emotion and spirit will converge in the human self" (p. 3). In order for this teaching to be possible, teachers need to be able to make educational choices.

EDUCATIONAL CHOICES AND CURRICULA

Educational choices are feasible when goals and benchmarks are part of a flexible system in which variations and individual differences are to be expected and encouraged. Kozol (2005, December) describes school curricula that empha-

size scripted instruction and procedures where spontaneous student teacher interactions are absent. Furthermore, Kozol (2005) denounces vehemently the many systemic injustices children face in education. In his view, education, particularly for the poor and minority students, has become an indoctrination of lower-level abilities and skills, which, in the best-case scenario, will “prepare” students for low-paying, menial jobs. This indoctrination offers no room for individualized instruction, and often relegates the curricula to a list of benchmarks.

These curricula are very different from those of the Italian elementary school system, which utilizes the “Programmi della Scuola Elementare document.” This 1985 document is still current, and it is regarded as a conceptual framework in which benchmarks are only a reference point for educators. The main frame of reference could be regarded as a humanistic approach to teaching and learning. In particular, creativity is viewed as one of the pivotal elements for the development of young learners (Educazione e Scuola, 2009). For instance, the acquisition of reading and writing skills at a basic level is considered as a benchmark for the end of first grade, with the stipulation that these skills may develop throughout second grade. It must be noted that the Italian system does not include a kindergarten level; thus, first grade is the first step into formal, compulsory education. In this perspective, the guidelines delineated into the official elementary school curriculum are considered as an ongoing working document for educators, who will adapt their instruction to the individual needs of their students in light of the spirit of the document more so than any prescriptive model (Educazione e Scuola, 2009). The Italian Elementary School system has often been regarded as a successful model in the European Community despite the numerous, chronic structural and financial challenges the whole educational world faces. In fact, Italian elementary school students ranked first in Europe and fifth in the world in language arts (Società Italiana di Statistica, 2010). I suspect that these students’ performances are not a coincidence, but that instead there is a direct correlation to the humanistic approach to education so deeply rooted in the Italian school system. For students to become successful, engaged learners, attention to their individuality and flexibility of curriculum design need to be the main focus.

TEACHERS AS KEY PLAYERS

Teachers become key participants in the learning process. As Palmer explains, teachers need to resume their traditional roles as mentors (1997). According to Ayers (2009), “Education in a democracy is geared toward and powered by a particularly precious and fragile ideal” (p. 31). This ideal is founded on the belief that every person possesses an “infinite and incalculable value” (Ayers, 2009). Based on this premise, the role of the educator becomes much more complex than that of simple transmitter of information.

I personally find troubling the perspectives on education implying that, given the right training, most educators should be able to deliver the same type of con-

tent in analogous fashion. By denying the uniqueness of the learners, as well as of the educators, we are utterly denying the values of civilizations that have deeply believed in the transforming power of knowledge as an internal process of growth and self-discovery, the “know thyself” of the Socratic tradition. We are also denying the power of education as an agent of change (Hohr, 2002; Plaut, 2010). As Ayers (2009) so eloquently explains, the pedagogy of questioning is part of a concerted effort to liberate and humanize education (p. 32). Furthermore, Ayers (2009) advocates for the end of standardized testing that makes young individuals and their communities losers or winners based on questionable pseudo-scientific criteria. Standardization appears indeed to be a problematic aspect of educational practices.

THE STANDARDIZATION QUANDARY

Standardized tests are ubiquitous across the United States. Although their goal may appear to be the attainment of students’ success and equal opportunities, the reality students and educators face is rather different. The term “high stakes testing” has become a buzzword in education. As Barrier-Ferreira (2007) explains:

Because the stakes have reached disproportionate levels, educators are often forced to abandon all things unrelated to the test and consequently lose sight of what is important: the whole child, who is not simply composed of intellect but is emotional and spiritual as well. (p. 139)

Although Barrier-Ferreira (2008) appears to believe that standardized testing “will ensure that we do not lose focus of academic excellence (p. 140),” Dodge (2009) does not seem to share the same belief: “Generally, the question of whether standardized tests measure what matters is troublesome” (p. 12). Furthermore, the instruments used for standardized testing, on many occasions, have been plagued by serious validity and reliability issues. Thus, the measurements convey flawed information (Dodge, 2009, p. 9).

As Dodge (2009) makes his concluding remarks on the role of assessment in education, he maintains:

What we have here is a failure to communicate. Those who believe that children need space and time and freedom to make mistakes, to exercise their imagination as well as their bodies, to grow in fits and starts and on their own timetables, and to be understood as the complex organisms they are, seem to be at odds with those who believe in packaging promoting, distributing, codifying and simplifying school assessments. (p. 13)

Another troubling aspect of standardized testing is the strong correlation between socio-economic status and standardized tests results; students from low socio-economic status score consistently lower on standardized tests. The measuring

instrument does nothing to address or even highlight the rooted inequities that so greatly affect students' performances, including scarcity of financial and human resources (Dodge, 2009, pp. 10-11). On the contrary, students may be penalized in their education because of their backgrounds while they also suffer from societal inequalities. The value that the US educational system places on standardized testing more and more looks like an elusive chimera.

Conversely, the Italian school system does not traditionally rely on standardized testing; although there are state exams, these are not, typically, fill-in-the-blank style tests. Students are required to write lengthy essays and demonstrate their critical thinking skills from an early age. Although Italy is moving toward standardization of education, there is vehement resistance to this approach, based on the humanistic tradition that is deeply rooted in the country. There is a widespread awareness that by standardizing responses, the uniqueness of the learning experience for each individual is denied. Also, a wrong-versus-right type of answer is often regarded as a refutation of the essential, and yet complex, facets of knowledge (Caianiello, 2010; Leggere, Scrivere e Far di Conto, 2010; Lupia, 2010; Pisa-Scuola Pubblica, 2010). Ultimately, deciding the type of assessments we want to see in our schools has deep implications for our educational systems and our societies as a whole.

A CALL TO ACTION: LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

It would be very tempting to blame others for the many difficulties educational systems encounter. Although societal issues should not be ignored and systemic injustices should be addressed as part of the plan for a democratic education, teachers at all levels should be encouraged to assume the role of leaders in their communities as they develop their mentorship roles. Parents and administrators should not fear teachers who challenge children to go beyond their limitations by exploring and questioning their world. On the other hand, teachers who are choosing the safe route and relying on the reassuring comfort of prescribed programs should seriously reconsider their roles and their motifs for teaching (Kozol, 2005; Ravitch, 2010). Plaut (2010) maintains that "our youth are truly free only when they are fully literate" (p. 1). In her definition, true literacy is empowering as it helps individuals become critical thinkers and involved citizens.

Educational quality is strongly intertwined with creating opportunities for all students to be themselves. Schools need to help students find out who they are and what their talents are as individuals. All students have talents; they just do not always have the opportunity to express those talents. When I was a green elementary school teacher in Italy, a young fourth grader started dancing during recess. This child was a very unengaged student most of the time, yet, all of a sudden, he showed an impressive level of skill and intensity. Once his talent became known to me, we established a new, deeper rapport that ultimately led to a stronger overall performance on his part. I have witnessed this miracle repeating

itself many times. Every time a student ceases to be an unknown entity, develops as a person, and is recognized as such, that student suddenly becomes invested in his or her learning and begins to truly learn. If we deny that students have talents, or if we simply ignore their potential, we are not seeing the students for who they are or who they could be. Without connections, human beings feel alienated and rejected. Yet in many learning environments, we are often telling students they need to forget who they are and what they like because there is work to be done. And so what could be exciting becomes, instead, the epitome of boredom. Then we try to entertain students in order to make learning fun again. We throw candies to our students when they get the answers “right,” or we promise them all kinds of rewards. And we forget that learning would have been fun to begin with if we had not stripped it of its original interest through the sheer excitement of discovery. When I decided to become a teacher, it was not without trepidation. I made an intentional decision that I would pledge all my energies and abilities to ensure that every human being, young or old, rich or poor, would have a chance to discover the inner richness of knowledge. This richness is connected with understanding the essence of the adventure of being human with all the possibilities and flaws, with all the heartbreaks and joys.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is imperative we recognize that education is made by individuals for individuals, who bring with them unique gifts and inclinations (Palmer, 1997). However, this realization alone is not enough if we want to see the future generations flourish and thrive in creative, stimulating learning environments. We need to ensure that students feel supported in developing their talents and individualities by designing curricula that allow flexibility and freedom of intellectual exploration. Although benchmarks and goals are useful indicators of performance, they should not be envisioned as rigid parameters by which we must wholly abide. Furthermore, we should dedicate intensive efforts in recruiting teachers who are truly experts in their fields and who are excited about engaging in academic discourse with their students and colleagues. As Palmer (1997) states, teachers are successful if and when they are invested in their disciplines and excited by teaching and learning in a dynamic, holistic fashion. The humanistic approach relies on the teachers’ ability to truly reinvigorate the “know thyself” motto even if it means that we need to rethink schooling as a whole.

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