

On (Elementary) Education: Reflection and Action

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Most parents want their children to be happy and fulfilled. But these days, more and more children seem to be suffering from various factors, including pressure to success (e.g., Abeles & Rubenstein, 2015, which is a truly great resource!). It also seems that parents, and grownups in general, are suffering as well, in many ways; again, one factor would be pressure to success. As both children and parents are pressured to be successful, mainly following the modern mainstream social values, we don't even have time to reflect on what is going on. What are we doing wrong? As a parent and a grownup, what should we do?

First, let us consider the natural course of human development. If children's biological and evolutionary expectations are *not* met, they will suffer (Liedloff, 1977). For example, the lack of timely and appropriate parental response toward her child would result in a variety of drawbacks (as described by attachment theory pioneers, John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, via Karen, 1994). Later on the developmental stage, elementary-school-age children would experience the shift of their focus from primary caregivers to the immediate neighborhood/community, including their schools (analogous to the idea of "matrix shift" in Pearce, 1977). The children would be interested in and eager to learn what is being done by the people in the community. If the community is relaxed, peaceful, and compassionate, the children would acquire these traits. On the other hand, if the community is stressful, violent, and self-centered, the children would acquire a rather different set of traits. I would like to live in a peaceful community and want all the children to be in such a community as well. I suppose you are no different.

In reality, though, many of us live in a community where the condition is mixed, neither entirely peaceful nor completely violent. Thus, it would be important for us to be able to improve our communities. The possibility of improvement is absolutely relevant to education. With the current, complex situation in our communities in mind, what should we do with respect to our children's elementary education?

One possibility I would consider is the following. If children are at peace *unconditionally*, that is, at all time and regardless of the conditions they would face, they could grow to build a peaceful community (analogous idea in Harrison, 2002; a relevant educational experiment by Hunter, 2013). Then, that may be the direction I would pursue in terms of children's education. In other words, my view of the goal of elementary education and our role in connection to that goal are to guide children to be peaceful. This would contrast with the mainstream position to

pursue our children's "success" (or even "happiness" in the conventional sense). Normally, this kind of success is measured by various external conditions, e.g., test scores, athletic achievements, financial status, and popularity among friends. And these are *conditional*. In my view, children and parents are suffering because of these external conditions. To be at peace unconditionally, esp. through the matrix shift during the elementary-school years, these external conditions or extrinsic motivators need to be minimized.

Most grownups, parents and teachers alike, try to have their children do something according to their agenda, e.g., to be successful with respect to external conditions set by grownups. Of course, peaceful childhood is our expectation too; but we do not and cannot really control this aspect, as will be discussed below. Now, most grownups regularly and consistently employ various means, including punishment, reward, or competition, i.e., extrinsic motivators, to realize *their* expectations. The use of extrinsic motivators indicates that children are being forced to do things they are not *inherently* interested in. These external conditions cannot really motivate children. Children may turn rebellious in certain ways. Even when these extrinsic motivators appear to be working, children actually don't develop interest in the *process* of learning, they just learn to do things to satisfy the external conditions. These children become addicted to external conditions and function as a follower of the conditions set by other people. Since real problems in our society cannot be solved by this type of followers, children raised and educated with extrinsic motivators will not be in a position to tackle such problems.

When children go through the matrix shift from primary caregivers to their community, they would be naturally interested in the activities of the community. They could learn various things through play and other interesting activities; children will naturally learn reading and math, if that is used in the community. Well, do grownups in our community enjoy reading and use math? In other words, real education needs to begin with children's problems, not grownups' problems. Then, children don't need to be forced to do things; they will do this with intrinsic motivation (e.g., Neill, 1960; Holt, 1976; Dennison, 1969; Gatto, 1992; and Kohn, 1993). For this to work, there is no need for punishment, reward, or competition. If the things done by the people in the community are good, children learn good things. If not, they could learn bad things. In either way, children would develop the ability to work based on intrinsic motivation. To be able to learn intrinsically, one of the most crucial aspect is that children needs to be free from fear, i.e., fear of punishment, negative judgment, losing relationships, etc. (Krishnamurti, 1953). If fear, such as those just mentioned, are present, children would try to satisfy grownups in order to avoid negative reactions and consequences. Such children would sacrifice their most valuable driving force behind learning, i.e., intrinsic motivation.

So, as a parent, a teacher, or just a grownup, we need to develop our own attitude in support of our children's ability to learn without fear *and* with intrinsic motivation. That is, we must avoid judgment that would *control* the behavior of our children. We must be able to let go of our own expectations for our children. This is far more important than being preoccupied with thinking

about what subjects and topics and how much of them our children must memorize (usually only temporarily). In this respect, excessive effort to “design” education and curricula seems futile. While it is all right and natural to have various expectations, including our expectation for peaceful childhood and life, if we are *stuck* with them and *force* our children to meet them, the children’s intrinsic motivation will be undermined. So, we need to develop the following attitude: **unconditional, non-judgmental, non-attached recognition of children**. This would be the most important thing the parents and the teachers of children can offer. Even without heroic actions, if we can maintain this attitude toward children, that would be the best we can do. Without children who are based on intrinsic motivation, there will be no improvement in our society.

But what about if the environment is already problematic? Since children tend to learn things from the community, we may be concerned and frightened. If possible, we may try to escape from such a community. However, the most important thing even in such an environment is the same: unconditional, non-judgmental, non-attached recognition of children. Thus, as long as there are parents, teachers, and community members who try to maintain this attitude, there is a hope. Although it would be extremely challenging, they may have an even better chance of improving the community than the people in a less problematic community without this attitude. Now suppose that we try to send our children to isolated alternative schools which emphasize intrinsic motivation. While it might be a good idea for children to attend such a school, there also are potential drawbacks. For example, would it be a good thing to do this, simply to avoid the problems with local schools? Would the children in isolated alternative schools be able to face and solve real social problems outside the school? Wouldn’t it be another kind of exclusiveness and selfishness? These are serious questions (most actively discussed in Kozol, 1972 and Graubard, 1972).

At this point, let us briefly discuss the connection between education and social issues. There are as many different approaches to social issues as there are people. And to improve society, it would be crucial for each one of us to be able to change. My view here is that just like children, adults can *not* really be changed by force either. If we can change, that must come from within ourselves. That is, the motivation for change must be intrinsic, not extrinsic. In this regard, we grownups are no different from children. Then, just like our attitude toward children, we will need **unconditional, non-judgmental, non-attached recognition of other people**, i.e., adults in this case. We need no judgment, no control, and no external conditions. Only when people are self-motivated to improve our environment and community, can a positive change occur. For this to happen, we each do the best we can and wait for things to change. Although this may sound too passive and ineffective, it may not be so because whatever we do by force will most likely rebound with exceedingly negative impacts.

In addition to children and the community, we can also apply the same attitude toward ourselves. That is, we can adopt the attitude of **unconditional, non-judgmental, non-attached recognition of ourselves**. This practice is basically “mindfulness” (e.g., Gunaratana, 2002),

which is a way to see things as they are. With that, our mind can be free from delusions and hatred. We may even be able to gain some wisdom. So, the bottom line would be that we can consider mindfulness as our general guidelines for all of parenting, education, and living.

Now, facing various problems, our approach would be not to “correct” them, because superficial “correction” will not lead to a real solution (as discussed in Arbing Institute, 1998, in the context of parenting). Instead, we can focus on *our own* action in context, e.g., in the community, with children, and toward ourselves. This way, we try to appeal to the intrinsic motivation of the involved people, i.e., children, other people, and ourselves. This can also be seen in the following way. Instead of focusing on *what*, we may well focus on *how*. For example, instead of being consumed by finding the most appropriate school for our children, we could focus on how to live a meaningful life with our children in the current environment. Of course, if there are bad things in the current environment, e.g., social injustice and violence, we should not simply accept and tolerate them. We should certainly identify and act on them. In certain cases, it may be necessary to escape or retreat. However, even such an action should come out of mindfulness, not out of emotional reactions or by the force of an authority.

My conclusion here is simple but important. We should be mindful and act responsibly; and now and here is the best possible situation (Warner, 2001). That would be my “action.”

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