

WHY WE NEED SCHOOLS WITH HEART AND SOUL

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By Linda Lantieri

We are living and educating our children in one of the most extraordinary times in human history, one that is perhaps even more distinct and momentous than when we shifted from the Agricultural Age to the Industrial Age. As we step into the new millennium, we are holding in our individual and collective hands, the opportunity to use our new knowledge and advances for unbearable evil, devastation, and moral breakdown—or for goodness, transformation, and hope. The choices we make today regarding how we nurture our children’s development will have critical implications for generations to come. Even as we make huge advances in the world of technology and in our understanding of the brain, we are struggling to rescue generations of young people who are not growing up with the supports they need to feel valued. In fact, Yale psychiatrist James Comer tells us that “we are doing the least harm to the most privileged.” According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s “Kids Count for 1999,” 21% of children in the United States still live in poverty and “are growing up with a collection of risk factors that are profoundly unsettling.”

Many young people today do not have any understanding that their lives have a higher purpose. Many have trouble imagining what their future will look like. Psychiatrist James Garbarino, author of *Lost Boys*, calls this “terminal thinking,” which he warns can undermine young people’s motivation to contribute to their community and invest in their present life circumstances.

The dilemmas of our times are ones that our young people need to be prepared to meet at all levels. The senseless stream of high-profile violent incidents in American schools share some common characteristics. These multiple murders, often linked to attempts at suicide by the perpetrators, have been in places where young people possessed too many things that had too little meaning. Material wealth did not seem to satisfy their deeper hunger for what feeds the soul. And yet, most young people growing up today, from the poorest to the most affluent, are imprisoned by our culture’s obsession with material things. Early on they get the message that to feel good about themselves or to feel the love of their family, they need to own the latest Star Wars toy, designer sneakers, or a fancy car. We are teaching children by example that we should look to the outside rather than the inside. In Dr. Martin Luther King’s words, we are “judging success by the index of our salaries or the size of our automobiles rather than by the quality of our service and our relationship to humanity.”

The fact is that an increasing number of children are entering schools cognitively and emotionally unprepared to learn. Educators today are being confronted with the challenge of strong public expectations concerning academic performance and diminishing internal resources to do a good job.

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Our schools function against this backdrop of social disarray, that tries the best of us. Instead of fostering meaningful discourse, tolerance of divergent thinking, and the opportunity to get to know ourselves and each other, schools today look more like what social psychologist Alfie Kohn calls “giant test prep centers.” The deeper questions of life have been put on the back burner. As educators, we are somewhat aware of this void, yet we are not sure what to do about it.

What is it young people need to know to facilitate the change and growth that would maximize their greatest potential for living together in this new millennium? Students need classrooms where they can construct their own meaning through open-ended discourse where their learning process is about transforming lives. Young people need schools that are willing to redefine the central issue of education from “I know, I do, I have” to “I am.” They deserve a vision of education that values the nurturing of student’s hearts and spirits along with their minds.

Over the past several years, I have been involved in helping create such a vision, and it has deep roots in a very specific experience and history. The Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP), which I co-founded in 1985, started as a joint initiative of Educators of Social Responsibility Metropolitan Area (ESR Metro) and the New York City Board of Education. Today, under the auspices of ESR’s national office, I serve as the founding director of a very successful, research-based K-12 school program in social and emotional learning that is now reaching more than 400 schools in fourteen school districts in the United States, with beginnings in Brazil, England, and Puerto Rico.

In my work with teachers, principals, and parents, I have asked members of hundreds of groups around the world to imagine the following:

If you could go to bed tonight and wake up in the morning with the power to ensure that you could teach one thing to all the children of the world, what would it be?

The responses are uncannily similar, no matter where I am or whom I ask:

- “That children feel loved.”
- “That they know they have a purpose.”
- “That they learn tolerance and compassion and that they have a sense of their interconnectedness and uniqueness.”

The tragedy is that few, if any, present systems of education in the world attend consciously and systematically to that which we clearly feel matters most.

In a recent international survey of 272 global thinkers, five shared values emerged: compassion, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect. These values seem to be so universal that it appears that they are agreed upon regardless of one’s religious or spiritual perspective. When the American Association of School Administrations asked 50 education leaders two similar questions—“What would students need to know and be able to do? What behaviors would they need in order to thrive during the next century?”—civility and ethical behavior were on the list. Luckily, we seem to agree on some of the fundamental tasks of education. It certainly goes beyond young people staying out of trouble and achieving academic competence. However, we

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have not yet outlined the steps needed to strengthen these shared values. What role can our schools play in shifting our strategies to welcome a more intentional development of the emotional, social, and spiritual domains?

From the very beginning, our aim with RCCP was to create caring, safe school communities in a society that seemed to be giving up on children and abandoning them to a climate of perpetual violence. Over the years, as we worked with teachers, administrators, young people and parents, I started to notice that sometimes our efforts reached beyond our goals of equipping young people with practical skills in conflict resolution. The kind of insightful thinking and courageous behavior our young people exhibited seemed like more than the by-product of a good prevention program. I was noticing that our work was causing a kind of transformational learning to take place.

When I first met Eugene, he had been a mediator for several years in his South Bronx high school, which was implementing RCCP. When he was asked by his teacher to think about a goal he had for himself, he said, "To be alive at 21." He was 18 years old at the time. A year after he graduated, I got a phone call from his principal who told me that Eugene had been in the "wrong place at the wrong time" and that while standing on a street corner in his neighborhood, he had been hit by a random bullet. He was in Metropolitan Hospital, paralyzed from the waist down. It took me 2 days to get up enough courage to visit him. As I walked into the hospital ward, I saw a disheartening sight—more than 30 young men in wheelchairs—whose "normal" lives had been sacrificed on the killing fields of New York City. I spotted Eugene immediately. When we started to talk, I asked him, "How are you doing?" I will never forget his response. He said, "I wasn't doing too great until this morning when I got up and decided to find the place in me that could forgive the guy who pulled the trigger." Almost speechless, I asked, "How were you able to do that?" He replied, "When I realized that I could have been that guy, if I didn't know there was a better way."

The kind of access to one's inner truth that Eugene exhibited is still the exception and not the norm in our work with RCCP. But it has inspired me to further young people's ability to live such lives of meaning and conviction. How can we make these exceptions in the lives of students and teachers more widespread, so that they affect millions?

There are more and more courageous educators and youth workers in schools and other educational settings who are providing the young people they serve with opportunities that truly feed their whole selves. They talk about schools as places that welcome some of the deeper life questions and build the kind of caring classroom communities that encourage this. In these educational settings, every student feels that he or she has something unique to contribute and that he or she is valued. We need to be inspired to pursue those teachable moments that will outlast our test scores, and not miss those opportunities because of fear of being off-task or censured. We need to insist that schools develop policies and approaches that enable all young people to have their emotional and social selves welcomed, spirits uplifted, and inner lives nourished as a normal, natural part of their education. We need nothing less than compassionate, insightful, and brave young people and adults who will learn how to do the extraordinary things necessary as we tackle the deep emotional, social, political, and spiritual issues of our time. As I look at the world challenges our young people will inherit—racism, poverty, violence,

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sustainability—I can't imagine how we will make it by leaving our hearts and souls out of it. My hope is that each of us finds the way to act to make sure that no part of a child is left behind, and that every aspect of the human spirit is welcomed in our homes, our communities, and especially our schools.

Note: Adapted from *Schools with Spirit: Nurturing the Inner Lives of Children and Teachers*, edited by Linda Lantieri, 2001, Boston: Beacon Press. Used with permission.

About the Author

Linda Lantieri has more than 30 years of experience in education as a teacher, assistant principal, director of an alternative middle school in East Harlem, and faculty member in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching at Hunter College in New York City. Currently she serves as the founding director of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP) of Educators for Social Responsibility, which supports the program in 400 schools at 16 sites in the United States. Started in 1985, RCCP is now one of the largest and longest running research-based school (K-8) programs in social and emotional learning in the country. She is also the Director of the New York Satellite Office of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) whose central offices are at the University of Illinois at Chicago. CASEL's mission is to establish effective social and emotional learning as an essential part of education from preschool through high school. Ms. Lantieri is co-author of the book *Waging Peace in Our Schools* (Beacon Press, 1996) and editor of the book *Schools with Spirit: Nurturing the Inner Lives of Children and Teachers* (Beacon Press, 2001). She is also senior scholar at the Fetzer Institute. She may be contacted at: Educators for Social Responsibility/Resolving Conflict Creatively Program, 40 Exchange Place, Suite 1111, New York, NY 10005; 212/509-0022; fax 212/509-1095; e-mail: llantieri@rccp.org