

The Diamond Educational System: Taking Care of Our Youth, Birth-16

Jillian Roberts¹ and Vicky Giouroukakis^{2*}

¹University of Victoria, Canada

²Molloy University, New York, USA

***Corresponding Author:** Vicky Giouroukakis, Professor, Molloy University, Manhasset, New York, USA.

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Abstract

The authors use the analogy of the diamond cutting industry to compare it to an ideal school system that would take care of and nurture children in grades B-16. They envision a school system that utilizes a humanistic, inclusive, socio-emotionally-sensitive, strength-based, and culturally-responsive approach that “takes care” of its youth so that they can become ethical and skilled citizens of the world. Inspired by the Reggio Emilia system, the authors outline the specific components that would be needed to create this loveable school.

Keywords: Education; Youth Development; Reggio Emilia; Social-Emotional Learning; Excellence in Schooling

Introduction

At the 34th Annual Roundtable Symposium at Oxford University on March 12-16, scholars from around the world finally had the chance to come together to discuss current issues and trends in education for the first time post COVID.

One significant theme of the conference included the emphasis on social emotional learning. As one presenter, Dr. Lea Goldstein, emphasized in her presentation, “Maslow over Bloom!” Another pressing theme was the complex state of the world our coming generations will inherit. With climate change, demographic science, economic/political instability, terrorism and war; we are arguably passing onto the next generation one of the most complex geo-political casse-têtes. Many have questioned whether we are in fact doing enough to prepare our younger generation to meet the challenges that are glaring in front of them. Other Round Table presenters, Susan O’Rourke and Theodora Papatheodorou emphasized that building a path to inclusion and support framework for students with special needs involves understanding the culture and context of the community that is being affected. Drs. Gwendolyn Webb and Brenda Townsend Walker, perhaps stated it best when sharing an updated African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child, but first we need to fix the village-cause it is messed up!”

Renowned environmental youth activist Greta Thunberg has accused the baby boomers of leaving her generation with an environmental crisis. She has argued how much easier this problem would have been to solve, if it had been addressed sooner. We wonder if future generations will look back and scorn and wonder why more was not done in the 21st-century to prepare children for the immense responsibilities that lay ahead of them.

Discussion

The diamond educational system—The diamond standard of education

Around the conference and dinner tables of the conference, Roundtable participants questioned why the needs of children were not given higher priority in national and international debates. It is as though world leaders are focusing on the wrong problems. If you think about setting off a set of dominoes, it is like world leaders are looking at middle dominoes when in fact they should be looking at the very first dominoes. If we really want to make a difference in our world, we need to consider our youngest generation and double down on giving them the skills, abilities, and moral compass required to adapt to this new complex world. Further we need to honor and elevate the status of professionals who dedicate their lives to caring for and teaching the very young.

When teaching a complex concept to the very young, seasoned educators will often use concrete terms. If you apply that logic to this conversation, then let's envision our children as priceless diamonds. Each priceless diamond carries immense value and is an absolute treasure; we can't afford to lose a single one.

Cutting diamonds (or lapidary) requires specialized knowledge, tools, equipment, techniques because of its extreme difficulty. It is the role of diamond cutters to see the value in each diamond and to facet the diamond with precision and incredible skill. If we understood that our economic future depended on these diamonds and the diamond cutters who faceted them, they would be cherished and upheld with love and respect.

Although blunt in its concrete terms, this analogy is a fair one. Our children are precious diamonds. However, our school system is not structured in the way that takes care of our children from the time they enter to the time they leave. Furthermore, society does not value, support or invest enough in the diamond cutters-the teachers of the very young. In many parts of the world, teachers do not even make a living wage.

Therefore, what we envision in an ideal school system is a humanistic, inclusive, socio-emotionally-sensitive, strength-based, and culturally-responsive approach that "takes care" of our youth in grades B-16 so that they can become ethical and skilled citizens of the world. The school and community which the school serves would work as a supportive team making sure that the students-the diamonds-stay protected and nurtured at all times. The concept is similar in the Reggio Emilia's system in which "municipal Reggio Emilia's municipal early childhood centres are managed by the Istituzione of Infant-toddler Centres and Preschools, a specific body created by the municipality in 2003 to safeguard the qualities and values of the educational services, and allow them to grow, with autonomous culture, pedagogy and management. The Istituzione has its own budget and staff nominated by the city mayor" ([1], para. 1). The mission of the Reggio Emilia system includes the value of creating "a loveable school, industrious, inventive, livable, documentable, and communicable" (Values, para. 1).

The school we envision entails creating an environment that includes the following components:

For faculty and curriculum:

Rigorous training and credentialing of faculty.

Securing teaching positions that are the right fit.

Renewable tenure that involves applying for and attaining tenure every 3 or 5 years.

Top, competitive salaries for all teachers that increase with annual professional development.

A rigorous but humanistic, inclusive, socio-emotionally-sensitive, strength-based, and culturally-responsive, curriculum that includes an interdisciplinary, project-based focused rooted in community service.

Language supports for language learners.

Access to resources that will facilitate students' educational journey. These resources can include books, technology, devices, etc.

For administrators:

Mentoring faculty to ensure they are supported professionally, socially, and mentally.

Collaborating with faculty on a rigorous but humanistic, inclusive, socio-emotionally-sensitive, strength-based, and culturally-responsive, curriculum development.

Observing, guiding, and supporting teachers as they implement an effective environment, curriculum, and set of instructional practices and strategies.

Providing professional development opportunities throughout the year to support effective teacher development.

Ensuring the provision of and access to resources (digital and print materials, space, experts) to facilitate student learning.

Serve as communication facilitators among the stakeholders: politicians, community, parents, faculty, and staff.

For social and human services staff:

A strong team of trained and caring psychologists, social workers, physical therapists, occupational therapists, and special educators who will collaborate in identifying and providing holistic solutions to the academic, cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical issues that students may have.

Collaboration involves having deliberate, meaningful, and planned conversations throughout the year to discuss and address these needs. The team needs to be able to communicate with one another when there is an issue that needs to be addressed so that they can triage and take of it on all sides.

For families:

Pathways of two-way, ongoing communication between the team and families to provide the necessary support for students.

Involvement to support student learning.

For the local and state politicians:

Use various means to promote the successes and accomplishments of this Diamond Educational System.

Conclusion

If you take three steps back and look at the entire situation, it seems clear that the human race is shooting itself in the foot. Circling back around the concept of social emotional learning and Maslow over Bloom, perhaps our world leaders should do a hard reset and prioritize what really matters. We need to align our own social emotional awareness with what really matters and what will really make a difference in the long run of our global community.

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Conflict of Interest

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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1. Reggio Emilia Approach. "Reggio Emilia approach" (2022).

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