

ECOLOGY, DEMOCRACY AND THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

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Introduction

I want to begin by sharing a parable.

A young monk asked a wise, old Buddhist monk. "What is the difference between heaven and hell?"

"There is little difference", replied the aged monk. "Both heaven and hell have a large pot of noodles in the center of a table. The smell of the noodles is delicious. The size of the pot and the number of people at the table are the same in both heaven and hell. Each person has a pair of 6-foot chopsticks to eat the noodles. In hell, the people are unhappy and always hungry because no matter how hard they try they are unable to use the 6 foot chopsticks to get food into their mouths".

"And is it the same in heaven? Are people always unhappy and hungry?" asked the young monk.

"No", said the aged monk. "In heaven, people are happy, contented and never hungry".

"Why is that so?" asked the young monk.

"Because in heaven", said the wise, old monk, "people use the 6 foot chopsticks to feed others. And that---is the difference between heaven and hell".

The moral of this parable is very simple. Interdependence is critical to survival.

Now, if I were a Buddhist monk, just having made my point, I would probably stop speaking and just sit down. But I am a professor, so let me provide some additional food for thought.

The idea that we are all members of the "family of man" is a wonderful sentiment. It makes us all feel good. It implies we are caring, compassionate and committed to the well being of others. But given the numerous examples of man's inhumanity to man, our behavior does not always match our espoused belief.

Today, my remarks will focus on ecology, democracy, the role of education and the interdependent dance that occurs within each and between each. First, through the lens of ecology I will advance the argument that interdependence is essential to the survival of all living things as well as other phenomena. Second, I will suggest that democracy is a manifestation of interdependence and that contributing to the welfare of others is critical to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Third, I will discuss the role of education and describe some ways elementary and secondary schools might teach interdependence, democratic processes and a concern for the welfare of others.

Ecology

Interdependence surrounds us. Ecology provides examples. Ecology, has been described as the branch of biology that deals with the relations of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings; the study of the interaction of people with their environment. The world is made up of webs of interconnectedness. All life is linked together. In examining the science of life and living organisms known as biology, they call this interconnectedness---this interdependence---symbiosis. Symbiosis has been defined as the relation between organisms that are interdependent and as a result of their interconnectedness each gains benefits from the other. Biologists have found that almost everything is the result of symbiotic interdependencies and that life seeks symbiosis so that more life may flourish. Contrary to Darwinian theory, symbiosis is the pathway to evolution---not survival of the fittest. In other words, evolution is the result of the desire to work out relationships for mutual coexistence, rather than competition.

We know intuitively that no woman or man is an island; that it takes a village. It is in our biology. It is in our DNA. And yet we persist in perpetuating the myth of the self-made man and the rugged individual. To some extent we are like the man who wishes to believe he was born in a log cabin that he built all by himself.

Ecology challenges conventional wisdom regarding the way the world works and illustrates how it is interdependence and not competition that is essential to survival. In the study of the science of life, living organisms create conditions for living with other organisms and codetermine the conditions of each other's existence. They shape the behavior of each other. Living organisms co-adapt, change and co-evolve. To quote Daisaku Ikeda, "...all things coexist within a context of mutually supportive interdependence ..."no beings or phenomena exist on their own; they exist or occur because of their relationship with other beings and phenomena."

Living organisms live in an interdependent world and so do people, animals, and organizations. The butterfly needs the nectar of the flower to survive as much as the flower needs the butterfly to cross-pollinate and propagate. All life is interdependent with the environment. Our global economies are interdependent. The individual and society are interconnected. Educators, students and parents are an interdependent ecosystem. Friends, enemies, the environment are all affected by each other. All life is involved in cause and effect relationships. Buddhists believe that if one causes happiness they will experience it and if one causes suffering they will experience it. Martin Luther King, Jr. echoed the same philosophy of interdependence when he said. "A threat to justice anywhere, is a threat to justice everywhere."

According to Margaret Wheatley, change occurs when humans better understand who they are and when they become aware of their interdependencies. If we become aware of how we cannot be separate and understand how interdependence is necessary to achieve common goals, there is a better chance that we will work together to co-adapt and change. When conditions are created to promote interconnectedness, people become aware of their interdependencies, work together to create conditions for living with others, shape each other's behavior, co-evolve and flourish.

Democracy

The classical notion of democracy is fairness, equality and human development through participation in decision-making. Democracy is an example of interdependence at work and is congruent with living systems theory, quantum physics, chaos theory all of which are dependent on participation. Democracy is ecological. Democracy addresses the common good and conditions for living with others. Democracy is a means "to form a more perfect union". Thomas Jefferson said, "To be free is to be bound together. To look out for oneself means attending to others". He noted that when it's everyman for himself—no one is free for very long and that freedom means responsibility—responsibility to others. How sad, that Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel once said that the military is "the last repository of civic idealism and sacrifice for the sake of the common good."

In their book, "Gardens of Democracy", Liu and Hanauer, acknowledge that the manner in which society functions influences how one behaves. But they take it one step further and suggest that ultimately, society is an outgrowth of one's behavior and society becomes how we all behave. They talk about how we are all motivated by self-interest and again take it one step further and turn the idea upside down by advancing the idea that mutual interest satisfies our self-interest because "we're all better off when we are all better off". In other words self-interest is mutual interest.

Society by definition is cooperative and not competitive. In a democratic society, the humanistic values of kindness, compassion, community, relational trust, interdependence, interconnectedness, fairness, and opportunity are foundational and critical. Democracy is about understanding interdependence, seeking connections, exploring together, and inventing new ways of doing things. Democracy builds capacity. Democracy advances the public interest. However, democracy does not perpetuate itself automatically. If democracy is to work, its citizens must be educated.

The Role of Education

Jefferson believed that an informed citizenry was critical to the vitality of democracy. He saw literacy and liberty inextricably intertwined and expected the public schools to play a vital role in preparing citizens for life in a democratic society. The progressive educator, John Dewey wrote at the turn of the 20th century, that education should prepare people for lifelong learning and that schools should structure experiences in ways that help students learn from life. He saw learning as a change within the participant that occurs as a result of the experience. He viewed schools as places where students gained an awareness of interdependence. Dewey saw the public schools as places where students were provided with experiences that helped them become more productive citizens in a democratic society. Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, the Japanese forward-looking educator and

contemporary of Dewey, as well as Dewey influenced the thinking of Mr. Ikeda. All three believe that the purpose of schools is life long learning and continuous self transformation, and that the task of education is to provide knowledge that furthers understanding, learning how to work with others and acting in ways that are respectful, fair, compassionate and just. Their writings all reflect that the mission of schools is to help students develop the knowledge, skills and commitments to participate effectively in the democratic process and contribute to the well-being of their community.

Since ancient times the continuing purpose of education has been to help people better understand and realize what it is to be a human being. Mr. Ikeda writes eloquently about education as discovery of the greater self, understanding the concerns of others, and from evolving from being to becoming. We have strayed from the original purposes of education. Education that is designed to improve student learning is different than an education that is set up to increase student achievement. Consumerism has influenced the role of education and the purpose of the public schools. Schools have become a means to preparing students for the workplace. Instead of helping students understand how we all need each other and the importance of working together for the common good schools have become places that prepare students to get a better job. In a recent New York Times Op Ed piece, Michael Roth, president of Wesleyan University asks, "Who wants to attend school to learn to be "human capital"? Who aspires for their children to become economic or military resources?"

Schools should return to the original purpose of schools, i.e. what it means to be a human being and a citizen in a democratic society. The curriculum should represent a heritage of what we need to learn in order to live well. Humanism, with its focus on the interests, values, capacities, worth, needs and welfare of humans, other living creatures and inanimate nature should be part of the curriculum. The importance of symbiosis, interdependence, how it is critical to democracy, social justice, working for the common good, the way we view the world and others it, and how all these things are connected should surface early in the curriculum.

A social curriculum can help students actively consider the impact actions have on others, provide them with the necessary skills so that they more effectively work together to create a more harmonious school life, work life and symbiotic world. If it takes a village to raise a child we need to build better villages. Schools are living systems and have the potential to build better villages. Schools should create community and a sense of belonging. Schools should develop human interdependence and nurture democratic values. Schools should foster safe, respectful, compassionate, inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments that reinforce democratic principles. The curriculum should help the school community consider the degree to which schools, and the society at large are democratic and how to effectively participate in overcoming its undemocratic aspects.

School communities are ecological. In school communities, educators, students, and parents are bound together. In the most effective schools, students learn from students, teachers learn from teachers, and students, teachers, parents and school leaders learn from each other. In order for schools to be places where students, educators and parents have

positive relationships relational trust must be in place. Dialogue has the potential to break down walls of mistrust and can be a powerful tool for building positive relationships and interdependence. In many schools, teachers, students, school leaders and parents have adversarial relationships. Schools can help school community members build their capacity to work together by: establishing a sense of belonging; focusing on democratic values; creating a culture that values respect, concern, consideration, trust, appreciation of differences, kindness, responsiveness, cooperation and compassion; and inviting participation in achieving a collaboratively identified goal.

Interdependence is critical to learning. Learning is a social activity and knowledge is constructed in a social context. Knowledge occurs when students construct meaning through interaction with each other and the environment they live in. Sharing perspectives, learners gain an understanding together that is not possible alone. In addition, it is through interaction with others that the individual becomes fully realized. Schools can be places that help students build interdependence and the interpersonal skills to be a productive team According to Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, "Positive interdependence is linking students together so one cannot succeed unless all group members succeed. Group members have to know that they sink or swim together." This approach to structuring experiences in interdependence for the purpose of achieving common goals is known as Cooperative Learning. Projects that bind people together to solve problems that each member could not solve alone help develop interdependence. For example, building a playground results in developing relationships, in exchanging information, in people discovering new skills, in adapting to one another, in discovering symbiosis, in developing a belief in the capacity of the group. As a result, people get better at working together and in turn take on another project.

It is important to acknowledge at this point that knowledge alone is not wisdom. Knowledge is a prerequisite to wisdom. Wisdom comes from understanding connections among things. For example, an encyclopedia contains and organizes knowledge but it does not make connections to content within the volume. It is therefore possible to have encyclopedic knowledge and lack wisdom. Interconnectedness is the critical common denominator. Not only is it critical to learning and gaining knowledge, but interconnectedness is even more critical to gaining wisdom.

Command and control as a leadership, teaching or policy-making strategy is not only anti-democratic, it is also unsustainable. Inquiry and dialogue that is inclusive, on the other hand, exemplifies the democratic process and helps energize everyone in their interdependent efforts to get to yes. The democratic process, a sense of community, interconnectedness and relational trust must be in place in order for teachers to consider adapting to change. In organizations that are flat, where everyone has an opportunity to have their voice heard and share in the decision-making process there is increased positive interaction and increased interaction leads to higher levels of satisfaction and productivity. Whether it is in schools, organizations or the global community, experience tells us that people do not sabotage an innovation when they have been part of its development.

It follows then that a key responsibility of school leaders is to create schools that are flat. School leaders need to work with faculty to collaboratively plan a high quality social curriculum that helps students understand democratic principles and provide opportunities to practice them in their daily inter-actions. School leaders and teachers should reconsider what democracy means in practice and as a result, readjust their teaching, managing and leading practices accordingly. In addition, policymakers should give careful consideration to the democratic process in their efforts to initiate change and reform.

School leaders that are thoughtful, compassionate, build relational trust, engage the entire school community in collaboratively developing shared values and a vision of a preferred future, as well as build commitment to mutually supportive interdependence, play an important role in shaping schools that are exemplars of interdependence and the democratic process.

Summary

Ecology illustrates that interdependence is critical to the survival of all forms of life. Democracy fosters interdependence, participation and a concern for the common good. Education can play an important role in creating a better, more compassionate world in which the welfare of others is considered important and necessary. Perhaps, if schools helped students better understand interdependence and its implications, served as models of the democratic process, and created opportunities for students to experience and practice democracy, bullying in the classroom and bullying on the world stage would be significantly diminished. Perhaps, we would all be less inclined to believe we can succeed at the expense of others or the environment.

We have the capacity to change ourselves by interacting, adapting with others and discovering new ways to co-exist, co-evolve and flourish. If society is an outgrowth of ones' behavior it is up to school leaders, teachers, students, parents and policy-makers to join together to develop schools as democratic communities. If society becomes how we all behave it is up to each and every one of us to initiate, facilitate, support and sustain the development of schools as democratic communities, with the hope that they evolve into larger, interdependent democratic societies, where everyone is concerned for the welfare of others and everyone works together for the common good.

I would like to close with a section from The Day of Affirmation Address, given at the University of Cape Town, South Africa by Robert F. Kennedy. His words are a metaphor for the power of interdependence.

Few will have the greatness to bend history; but each of us can work to change a small portion of the events, and in the total of all these acts will be written the history of this generation... It is from numberless diverse acts of courage... [and] ... belief that this human history is shaped. Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

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