

Education as a Ubiquitous Learning Web, Immersed in Living

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Abstract

This essay describes the personal philosophy of education I have developed through my formal and informal education in both South Korea and the United States. While much of the world considers institutionalized school education to be the essential and only way to be educated, I suggest, instead, relational, communicative, and informal ways of learning, which occur in a ubiquitous learning web, immersed in living. To open the discussion, I describe how my early experiences as a public school student in my home county of South Korea, shaped my developing perspective on educational systems. I then integrate published theories to articulate my view of an ideal educational system, which values personal interest, community-based learning, and informal education.

Personal Experiences in School

I have been a student for a long time. Although I generally did not have pleasant experiences as a young public school student in South Korea, I never questioned the school system that I was a part of because going to school every day was and still is accepted as the natural routine for South Korean children and teenagers. I was a good student, trying to meet the expectations of my teachers and parents but was frequently unhappy because I had no control over my own schedule or course of study. I accepted that I had to obey the school schedule,

curriculum, and rules in order to live a *successful* life without ever considering what that successful life, defined by others, would mean for me. I often experienced anxiety over the intensive schedule imposed by the school and was unhealthily obsessed with my grades. As a teenager, I was constantly modifying myself to fit into the system even though the pressure left me feeling overwhelmed. In my senior year of high school, I became very weak, both mentally and physically, and experienced frequent nervous breakdowns and depression. In order to function, I had to rely on a psychiatrist and chemicals which worked only temporarily. I cried for days and finally lost interest in doing school work.

After graduating from high school, instead of pursuing a traditional college program, I took a year off from academics and decided instead to devote the time to art-making, which had been my only escape from intensive school work. I wanted time to contemplate my life and consider, for the first time, what I really wanted to do rather than what other people and society expected of me. Although my high school teachers urged me to apply for the most prestigious art schools in South Korea because my SAT score was high enough to be accepted, I rejected their suggestions. I knew that I did not want to be stressed out from the school system anymore and suffer under the pressure to compete with my classmates for high grades. I wanted to make art simply because it brought me happiness. I came to the conclusion that if I was happy with my teachers, the educational program, and the surrounding environments of a school, then that would be the best school for me. I wanted to go to an art school which was remote from busy cities, provided great facilities and studios for art-making, and had a spacious campus embedded in nature. Based on these criteria, I decided to attend an art program at a university located in Gyeongsan, suburb of Daegu, South Korea. Looking back, I can still say that this was the best art

school for me and that my four years of creating art there were joyful, challenging, and invaluable.

As a teenager, I was entirely unaware of how I was being subtly manipulated by the entire school system. Only recently have I come to understand how the institutionalized educational system in South Korea is based on Western school development and design, which was adopted during and after the Korean War when American military forces occupied the Southern half of Korea. Even though I had learned about the Western influence on the South Korean educational system in my college Art Education courses, I never saw it as problematic because I was immersed in it and had never been challenged to interrogate its principles. One of the premises that the South Korean public educational system embraces is that people should go to school to learn and develop social and communicative skills and to achieve their goals and dreams. For a long time I embraced this view, failing to imagine other forms of education. I was also led to believe that whatever is taught at school is the truth, and that standardized tests are the absolute means of measuring one's knowledge and capability. Since I was surrounded by the discourse of this educational system for my entire childhood, it was impossible for me to see it from a critical point of view. I was blind.

Exposure to Different Perspectives

The doctoral program in Art Education at Penn State offered my first exposure to critical perspectives on the prevailing educational system. For example, in my course on the History of Art Education, I read Joel Spring's book, *The American School: From the Puritans to No Child Left Behind*. In this book, Spring (2008) discusses how the school system in the U.S. developed in a way that excluded indigenous and other minority cultures, including Native American, Hispanic, African American, and Asian. I was dismayed to learn that the institutionalized school

system was, in fact, intentionally used as a tool to assimilate others into the dominant Western culture. Madhu Prakash's course, Introduction to Philosophy of Education, had an even more profound effect on my understanding of the problematic nature of the Westernized educational system. This course and Prakash's philosophy have greatly influenced my philosophy of education in ways that I will articulate more fully below.

Alternative ways of learning

In Prakash's course, I read many innovative philosophers' books and articles, was exposed to numerous alternative ways of educating, and was encouraged to reflect deeply on the new ideas I was being exposed to. Through this process, I developed the idea that school education is not the absolute way of educating people but that there are many alternatives that are equally or even more valuable. When people think about education, they automatically tend to connect it to schools, degrees, diplomas, and physical school buildings and campuses. However, institutionalized education is only one among many forms of possible educational experiences. For example, home schooling is one way to educate children while community and museum learning and experiences can be other ways. For instance, founded in 1921, the Summerhill School in Suffolk, England is an unconventional school based on the founder Alexander Sutherland Neill's philosophy of education. Neill (1993) believes in children's inherent personal freedom and that all children are born good and that restraints imposed on them by parents and other authority figures result in unhappiness, bad behaviors, self-consciousness, and hatred toward others and themselves. In Summerhill, students are allowed to choose courses, design their own schedules, and create their own school rules through weekly meetings (Neill, 1993). Another example is the Delta Program, an alternative secondary school

in the State College Area School District, PA. While Delta students are required to meet the same graduation standard as all other schools in the district, they have more flexibility to choose their courses which can take place on site, in other secondary schools, or even at Penn State University. The program has offered many innovative courses on arts, food, and the natural environment and, like in the Summerhill program, Delta students are granted the privilege and responsibility to participate in creating school rules through regular meetings with other classmates and teachers.

Grassroots learning

Through Prakash's course, I also learned to value indigenous, grassroots ways of living and learning—practices regarded as *less developed* from the perspective of the so-called *first world* (Prakash & Esteva, 2008). In their book, *Escaping Education*, Prakash and her co-author, Gustavo Esteva, challenge the widely-held belief that education is a basic human right of everyone on earth. Rather, they argue that two thirds of the world's people, who would be considered non-educated, under-educated, or mis-educated from the Western universal educational point of view, have equally valuable perspectives and lifestyles with respect to the natural world, the maintenance of cultural traditions, and the interconnectedness among community members (Prakash & Esteva, 2008). These grassroots people do not think of education as a tool to gain power and to control other people and cultures. Rather their beliefs and practices emphasize the importance of “place, commons, or community” (Prakash & Esteva, 2008, p. 3).

I have given careful thought to the idea that being *less developed* can be interpreted in a different way. In terms of economic power and industrial technology, *developed* countries have achieved progress, but their dominant system has seriously damaged the natural world and relied

on the exploitation of countless people. The achievements of these countries have been based on the implicit premises that natural resources are unlimited and that the future of human beings is not linked to that of the Earth. It is now becoming increasingly evident that the development that has occurred is unsustainable and unbalanced and that soon there will be nothing left for us or the generations to come. The situation is even more disturbing when we acknowledge that only a small percentage of the world's people are responsible for the vast majority of the depletion of natural resources and generation of waste.

Less developed countries have their own rich cultures and communities and ways of living, which are different from those of Western societies, but equally valuable. Many of these countries value the natural world and use natural resources responsibly. In this sense, they are truly developed in a sustainable way, not using up natural resources for their own gain but leaving them for future generations and other living organisms on the Earth.

Who is educated?

Through my study in Prakash's course, my notion of what an educated person is has changed dramatically. I can vividly recall debate among students in one class that related to the short story, "Assembly Line," by B. Traven. In the story, Mr. E. L. Winthrop from New York, U.S. does not understand why an Indian man in a small village of Oaxaca, Mexico, does not want to make thousands of hand-woven baskets (*canastitas*) for the good amount of money he has offered (Traven, 1993). Mr. Winthrop calculated only the monetary cost of the raw materials to assemble the baskets. He failed to consider the costs in effort, time, and mental energy that would be required. The Indian man describes the process of making baskets. In order to make thousands of baskets instead of a dozen, he would need more little red beetles, plants, roots, and bark for the dyes and more time to prepare fibers. He goes on to say that taking on such a project

Education as a Learning Web/ Jung

would mean less time to take care of his family, crops, and livestock. At the end of the story, Mr. Winthrop yells at the Indian man, insulting his intelligence. But Mr. Winthrop is the ignorant man in this pair, failing to understand that each basket needs its own uniqueness and the creator's soul.

The main debate centered on the question of who was the more educated person—Mr. Winthrop, a man who probably went through the public school system in the U.S. and held a college degree, or the Indian man, who grew up in a small village with his family and learned everything from the community and nature. Students in the class were divided into three debating groups. One group thought Mr. Winthrop was not educated while the Indian man was and another group argued that both were educated. The last group included people who could not make up their minds or were in between stances. I joined the first group because Mr. Winthrop treated the Indian man as an assembly line worker or his own assistant, paying no respect to his ways of living and thinking. On the other hand, the Indian man understood interdependent relationships and patterns between humans and the rest of the natural world and respected the trees, plants, and animals by not exploiting or disturbing the flow of nature. He did not react to Mr. Winthrop's impolite gestures with the same manner but rather remained calm and respectful.

In my view, educated people do not look down on people with different ways of living, thinking, and learning. If one does not care for and respect other people and instead, places the self above others, the number of degrees she or he holds becomes pointless. Such a person has missed the most important point of all; that all people should live in harmony together and that everyone is capable and worthy of respect. I have met people who yell at other people when things do not go the way they wanted and who treat those with less power as their assistants. I also have had experiences with my former art teachers who imposed their artistic style on my

paintings and who used their grading power to force me to create work the way they wanted. Are they educated? From the Westernized sense of education, they are because they have earned many degrees from educational institutions. However, from my own perspective, they are not. For me, an educated person is one who values and respects a complexity of different perspectives and understands the interconnectedness and interdependence of people, cultures, and the larger natural world.

My Understanding of Education

I have come to the conclusion that school education is not the only way to be educated but that there are millions of ways to learn. I had unpleasant and even painful experiences as a student in the Korean public school system and met many schooled people who did not value cultures and epistemological ways that differed from their own. Therefore, I do not believe that the public education system and standardized tests should be the only ways used to judge a person's capabilities and potential. Rather, we should embrace different ways of viewing the world and understand that learning can occur anytime and anywhere. For example, I learned sewing without taking any formal classes. As a child, I used to watch my mother sew and helped her with simple tasks like holding, cutting, and measuring material. About a year ago, I bought a sewing machine and decided to teach myself how to sew. I purchased a couple of books, went to sewing websites, and conversed with my mother in South Korea via phone. By doing, making mistakes, and repeating the process, I learned how to sew in my own way and I am still learning. Now, I consider myself an advanced seamstress, creating dresses, coats, hats, and other innovative items. For my mother's birthday last year, I sent her a home-made dress.

Education as a Learning Web/ Jung

We are capable of educating ourselves all the time. Learning opportunities and teachers abound everywhere, not only in schools. Therefore, education and learning processes cannot be separated from living and daily life. My boyfriend Michael and I recently started gardening in Prakash's backyard. As a novice gardener, I did not have any knowledge related to growing flowers, vegetables, and fruits. With the help of Michael, who used to garden on his own and has helped with his father's garden for years, we first purchased several kinds of seeds that we wanted to grow, including Chinese cabbage, lettuce, Korean melon, Asian eggplant, and pea. We went online to gather basic information about each kind of plant, such as when they should be seeded and harvested and whether the climate in Pennsylvania is suitable for Korean vegetables.

Prakash introduced us to her friends and neighbors who have been gardening for years. We learned a great deal from their know-how regarding planting and caring for the garden ecosystem. For example, eggplants and tomatoes do not like cold soil so they have to be germinated inside (e.g. greenhouse) first and then planted outdoors after the last frost of the year. We were also advised to grow rye so that it could be chopped and mixed with the soil at the end of the fall to provide rich nutrients for the new crop the following year.

Education is the process of learning which can happen through attending schools, visiting community centers and museums, participating in family conversation, watching television, and surfing the Internet. Whether one wants to learn art-making, sewing, or gardening, the necessary skills can be achieved through thousands of ways from taking formal classes, participating in community learning programs, to self-teaching. In the processes of learning and communicating, people come to understand the importance of interconnectedness and interdependence among people, organizations (i.e. schools, cultural centers, libraries, and museums), and the natural world. For example, in order to learn how to garden, I communicated with many people, checked

out related books from a library, and self-taught through repetitive mistakes and intuitive findings. My experience demonstrates how rich learning can occur through communication, collaboration, and interaction with the people and environments available in our daily lives.

Redefining Education

In short, I view education as a ubiquitous learning web, immersed in living. In order to apply my philosophy in practice, it is necessary to reconceptualize the word *education* from how it has been used in general. In doing this, I draw on Aaron Falbel's article, "Learning? Yes, of course. Education? No thanks," which appeared in *Growing without Schooling*, a newsletter devoted to homeschooling started in 1977 by John Holt and ended in 2001. Holt was a teacher devoted to the Modern Homeschooling Movement who coined the term *unschooling*.

Unschooling refers to a natural way of teaching and learning which eschews fixed curricula (Farenga, n.d.).

In this article, Falbel (1993) cites a 1982 interview with Holt about how he defines the word *education* in comparison with how most people use it. Holt says that when most people think of education, they tend to embrace certain assumptions such as learning takes place in a special learning place, apart from the rest of life when we are not doing anything else (Falbel, 1993). Another commonly held assumption is that "education is a designed process in which some people do things to other people or get other people to do things which will presumably be for their own good" (Falbel, 1993, p. 13). In contrast, Holt sees education as a process of being "informed, intelligent, curious, competent, skillful, [and] aware by our interaction with the world around us" (Falbel, 1993, p. 13). In other words, he emphasizes that learning is immersed in the process of "living, working, playing, [and] being with friends" (Falbel, 1993, p. 13). He does not draw a line between learning and living and, in fact, feels that doing so is impossible. He goes on

to say that he cannot find a word to define *education* unless “it might be *living*” (Falbel, 1993, p. 13).

By citing the interview, Falbel (1993) invites readers to reflect on the difference between education and learning, which many people use interchangeably. He argues that while education refers to some sort of *treatment* through which “people need to be taught how to learn or how to think,” learning is a natural human activity, like breathing, part of being alive (Falbel, 1993, p. 13). Like Holt, Falbel believes that education in general refers to

a designed process in which one group of people (educators, social engineers, people shapers) tries to make another group (those who are to be “educated”) learn something, usually without their consent, because they (the educators) think it will be good for them. (Falbel, 1993, p. 13)

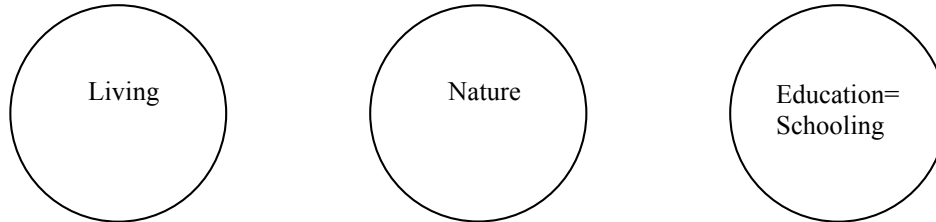
Falbel (1993) asserts that forcing people to learn something is not effective and in fact this is why most education does not work.

Perhaps when people use the word *education* then, they are actually referring more specifically to *schooling*. According to Ivan Illich (2002), schooling has transformed non-material human needs (e.g. education, health, welfare, etc.) into sellable commodities which are believed to be obtained in schools, educational centers, and hospitals. Schools are automatically considered institutions that specialize in education, curricula, and instruction. In other words, education has been packaged for certificates and diplomas given to students who fulfill the mandatory attendance and demands of standardized tests. Illich (2002, p. 12) argues that the school system is based on the illusion that “most learning is the result of teaching” in an intentionally designed environment.

In *Figure 1.1*, I simplify how Holt, Falbel, and Illich think education is conceived in most people’s minds. Living and education are considered two separate human activities which are not linked to the natural world. In this view, learning is assumed to occur through schooling by

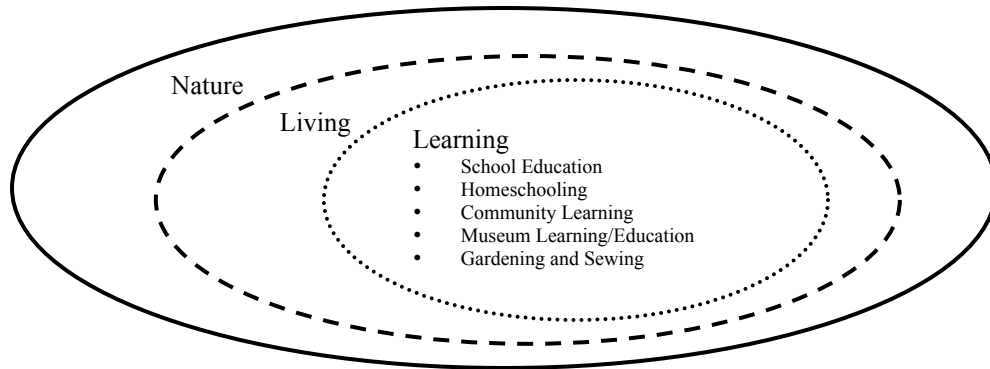
professionals who are trained to distribute packaged knowledge through “curriculum, course structure, and bureaucratic administration” (Illich, 2002, p. 19).

Figure 1.1. Conventional Concept of Education



On the other hand, what those thinkers describe as learning, which I see as a broader concept than education, can be simplified and visualized as in *Figure 1.2*. In this model, education is part of learning, which is the process of getting to know and experience something through various interactions and communications among human and nonhuman entities within nature as part of life. Therefore, learning is part of living in the natural world. Borders between elements are permeable to emphasize that they are interconnected and interdependent. In other words, learning takes place as we interact with the natural world and other people. Through these processes, we gain a better understanding of each other, different cultures and ways of living and thinking, and the larger ecosystem of the Earth.

Figure 2.1. Education Immersed in Living and Nature



Going back to the garden example, by learning how to grow vegetables and fruits, interacting with experienced people, making mistakes, and repeating processes, I have learned four important life lessons. First, I feel that I am part of the natural world by dwelling in it and consuming food directly from it. I also directly experienced that we share natural resources with other creatures. For example, I have lost sprouts of lettuce, beets, and peas which were eaten by a rabbit. While I felt disappointed to see the devastated part of the garden, I understand that I contributed to the rabbit's healthy ecosystem. Second, I have a deeper appreciation for how challenging it is to grow food and how fortunate we are to be able to buy a variety of produce in our local market. I have an increased sense of gratitude towards the people who work to make this convenience available to us. Third, I have learned that teachers are everywhere. Prakash, her friends, and my boyfriend are my garden teachers. Lastly, I have found that I learn something new every day. Too often, we allow our hectic schedule to blind us to the learning opportunities which are constantly available to us.

One day I left a bunch of nice looking plants growing in our garden simply because I thought they were sprouting from our seeds. Later, I discovered that they were aggressive weeds that would harm our garden. I also learned what asparagus plants look like when they have passed their proper harvest time and how brussels sprouts grow, which had previously been

beyond my imagination. The garden experience clearly demonstrates the second model, showing how learning can take place within complex networks among people, things, and nature.

Ecological Educational Web

This second view of education is based on an ecological perspective which rests on the premise that diverse life forms, human communities, and natural environments are interrelated and interdependent in the form of interactive networks and patterns. The ecological model of learning and education is at the heart of my educational philosophy which is, to restate, that education involves connecting learning networks in the form of a ubiquitous learning web within our daily lives and nature. This perspective is influenced by Illich's notion of the *educational web* or *opportunity web*, which is also based on the ecological perspective.

According to Illich (2002, p. 77), the educational web is a network characterized by mutual access, that is "readily available to the public and designed to spread equal opportunity for learning and teaching." The educational web denies constrained, regulated, and specialized obligatory school education but relies on complex, lifelong, and informal education (Illich, 2002). Illich (2002) goes on to say that informal and participatory education allows people to give and take great opportunities and to be part of multiple learning processes through activities in workplaces, libraries, museums, and hospitals. He argues that this alternative education should not be based on public resources, but on the creation of a new type of educational relationship that interconnects people and the environment (Illich, 2002). Illich (2002) envisions a good educational system as one which provides people who want to learn with access to any resources at any time of their lives and empowers those who want to share and learn.

This network system specifically provides access to four essential learning sources—*things, models, peers, and elders* (Illich, 2002). Illich (2002) believes that valuable information

Education as a Learning Web/ Jung

can be stored in things and people (role models). Peers and elders can be colleagues or consultants who raise questions, share and exchange ideas, and contemplate and solve questions and challenges together. According to Illich (2002), the educational web can function through four interrelated approaches: 1) Reference services to educational objects—systems should be in place to facilitate access to things or processes which can be used for formal learning, 2) Skill exchange—permits listing skills should be encouraged to help link skilled people with those who want to learn, 3) Peer-matching—a communications network should be provided to assist people in finding partners for their inquiries, and 4) Reference services to educators-at-large—addresses and self-descriptions of professionals, paraprofessionals, and free-lancers should be available. Establishing these four approaches would create an educational market for various types of learners, methods, and artifacts (things) to be utilized freely (Illich, 2002).

In such a setting, education would no longer be a forced activity imposed by professionals in an isolated place. The role of teachers becomes more like that of custodians, guides, and partners (Illich, 2002). Peer-matching can encourage the revival of local cultures and lifestyles that have disappeared because of the obligatory school system that has located people in a remote grouping apart from their local context (Illich, 2002). This will encourage people to build new trust based on their motivation and will, relying less on the professional judgment of educators (Illich, 2002). As a result, people can have greater freedom to choose what they want to learn, in collaboration with whom, and in which setting.

While Illich does not explicitly connect his educational web to an ecological perspective, his ideas can easily be related to the concept of an ecological web or network, as described in Fritjof Capra's (1996) book, *The Web of Life*. First of all, the metaphors of *web* and *network* are clearly related. Capra sees all living systems as consisting of a web of relationships embedded in

larger networks while Illich understands education as networks of relationships. Secondly, even though the two thinkers discuss different phenomena, biological living systems versus learning processes, their approach to each is very similar. According to Capra (1996), unlike a shallow ecology which separates human beings from the natural world and puts them above it, a deep ecological perspective sees humans as part of “a network of phenomena that are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent” (Capra, 1996, p. 7). This deep ecological perspective draws on *systems thinking* which encourages people to see living systems as an “integrated whole whose properties cannot be reduced to those of smaller parts” (Capra, 1996, p. 36). This perspective is in opposition to *mechanical thinking*, which sees the whole as a collection of parts (Capra, 1996). When this view is applied to epistemology, how people come to know is understood as deriving not from accumulated bits of information but rather from experience in a network of ideas and environments (Capra, 1996).

Likewise, Illich’s (2002) educational perspective parallels systems thinking. According to Illich, in schooled society, to be educated, people go to an institution where professional teachers transmit packaged knowledge to their students, who are removed from their own context of culture, family, and nature. This perspective is based on the mechanical thinking process. In contrast, in his educational web, students have freedom to choose their own teachers and to learn what they are interested in. By facilitating four interrelated approaches and resources, interconnected, interdependent, communicative, and mutual relationships are formed. As a result, people are not just accepting pre-made knowledge from trained professionals in a rectangular box but rather are invited to learn in their own context of culture, interests, and enjoyment.

Conclusion

Completely abandoning the established educational systems and starting from scratch might be the ideal, but such a change would likely be rejected by the public as too radical and would also require a great amount of time to actualize. Therefore, the best way to begin to enhance people's learning opportunities is to start from within the existing system by applying the ecological educational approach. Educational institutions can provide interactive classes, programs, workshops, and discussion groups in collaboration with educational professionals, other cultural and educational institutions, and community members. In such a setting, skills can be exchanged and a communicative network can be created among community members. Participants can find partners who have similar interests and inquiries or useful skills to learn and teach. Through this process, people will grow to feel more grounded in their own communities. As a result, local cultures can be revived. Students can be liberated from feeling isolated in the obligatory school system and peer-groups which are constructed according to commodified design and convenience as opposed to sincere learning desire.

Therefore, even though school education can be limited by facilities, materials, resources, funds, and teachers, new ways of interpretation, communication, and collaboration can accommodate diverse needs and interests and stimulate the motivation and curiosity of students and community members. Through these processes, students will be empowered to act as learning agents, and their voices can be heard and reflected in the educational network of schools, museums, community centers, and other cultural and educational institutions. In turn, educational professionals can act as custodians of cultural heritage, collections, and various stories but, at the same time, as guides and mutual partners to their constituencies.

Schools, museums, and other educational institutions should be understood as organisms and communities, which are interwoven by the invisible net of the social web. Each institution is

made of many different patterns of people and departments, and also plays a role as a pattern or web in a larger educational infrastructure. Furthermore, each element, whether small or large, is interconnected, interdependent, and multi-directional. Applying this perspective and improving current educational systems in more communicative, democratic, relative, informal, and personal ways will require the collaborative and collective efforts of all parties.

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