

At the Heart of a Teacher: Schooling in a Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

In a time of great crisis, teaching and learning has become personal. This essay examines what every and any teacher's heart has to be.

Keywords: teaching, schooling, COVID-19, global pandemic

The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.

—Mark Twain

These are troubling times. A pandemic has swept the world with accompanying death and fear. As a lifelong educator, I think of its impact on our children and on their education. In the United States, schools are closed, and children are being “schooled” in their homes. Parents are deeply and intentionally involved in their children’s learning in often new and rediscovered ways. Leading to more thought about what is at the core of the education of children in a democracy, this is an excellent time to consider and remember what is at the “heart” of a teacher.

Regardless of whether the teacher is in a K-12 or university classroom, at home, in the community or perhaps in church, there must be an important connectedness, a relationship, between teacher and learner. Also, between

the teacher, learner and subjects. That connectedness is the centerpiece of successful teaching, according to Parker Palmer (2007). Heart means “the place where intellect and emotion and spirit...converge in the human self” (11). The methods and pedagogy are not as important as bringing an authentic self to the task and to building rapport.

Being optimistic is an important and heartfelt attitude which is indispensable to being authentic. Kahneman (2011, 291) examines optimism in terms of the way it shapes how we engage with risk and, subsequently, take action. He argues that “when action is needed, optimism, even of the mildly delusional variety, may be a good thing” (ibid). An optimistic perspective is inspirational to those we teach. Indispensable to being present to students (no matter what age and circumstance) as real, positive, and optimistic, it motivates them to engage with their learning, participate in solutions and bring their full intellect and spirit to the cause (for case studies on optimism’s effects, see; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Leroy, Anseel, Gardner, & Sels, 2015; and Seligman, 2002 (Koerner, 2020).

These extraordinary times also bring opportunities. Amidst despair, we can reconnect both inside and outside formal educational contexts to the lives of children. It is a reminder of John Dewey’s declaration that education is a process of actual living and not preparation for future living (Dewey, 1916). This re-newed connection between formal and informal education reminds us that student interests should drive instruction (Dewey, 1938). This means that children are viewed as unique individuals; students can be found busy at work constructing their own knowledge through personal meaning, rather than teacher-imposed knowledge and teacher-directed activities (Schiro, 2013). Connected learning is the perfect environment for this.

Twain’s adage compels all of us to think about what is at the heart of our hearts. What is our purpose. Palmer (2007) eloquently says, “Small wonder, then, that teaching tugs at the heart, opens the heart, even breaks the heart” (11). For educators, regardless of role, our purpose is to connect with other human beings through our teaching. We become embedded in our community as we build our legacy.

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