

Educating Balance In An Accelerating World

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Abstract

As the technological speed of modern society increases at exponential rates, so has the experience of early childhood been radically altered. Children are faced with increased levels of cognitive stimulation and complexity from their early years. The statistics of the incidence of childhood mental health disorders, such as ADHD, are rising. As the very landscape of childhood has shifted so dramatically since parents and teachers were themselves children, and is increasingly characterized by continuous change rather than by stability, in what ways must educational approaches adapt to help children to successfully integrate these experiences and reach their full human potential? Is cognitive development in itself sufficient to guarantee happiness, or does conscious attention need to be given to the development of social, emotional and spiritual competencies? How to facilitate the development of an internal "compass" to prepare children to navigate the challenges of a technological, commercialized culture?

This paper explores these questions according to the holistic approach to early childhood development offered by Neohumanist Education. It examines the ways that Neohumanist education balances extroversial sensorial stimulation and cognitive development, with training in introversal capacities such as self-regulation, empathy and creative visualization. The Neohumanist teacher's own subjective experience and self-development is seen as an inseparable part of the teaching process. The paper studies Neohumanist Education's synthesis of classical eastern wisdom teachings from the ancient tradition of yoga that highlight personal development and collective values with modern western progressive educational techniques that cultivate rationality, logic and individual creative expression. The holistic vision of Neohumanist education is essentially an ecological vision that honors the interconnectedness of the web of life, seeking to preserve children's sense of being connected to a greater whole, engage them in learning as joyful discovery, and help them discover meaningful ways to contribute to their world.

Introduction

The very landscape of childhood has been radically altered since those of us now involved in early childhood education were children. Contemporary adults may treasure fond childhood memories of acting out elaborate imaginary adventures with friends outside, playing on swings, riding tricycles, baking cookies, and picking juicy strawberries. Our early childhood world was decorated with bright finger paint, play-dough snakes, wooden blocks, baby-dolls, balls and board games. The natural attraction to role-play and practice for adult life took the form of sneaking into our parent's closets to try on ties or high heeled shoes. By contrast, while many of these play opportunities still exist, the modern European toddler may already have her own MP3 player and other technological devices, and often spends hours in front of computers and televisions. Many young children imitate adults by playing with pretend cell-phones and laptops. Children, in their innate eagerness to learn, are attracted by new technology and their flexible and absorbent minds master it quickly and easily. They have access to a far greater volume of information at a far earlier age.

Increased stress in early childhood

How has this affected the world of childhood? "According to the Alliance for Childhood and others, overscheduling, emphasis on academics in preschool, too much sedentary screen time, lack of safe place spaces, and violent TV/movie-based toys all threaten healthy playtime, putting play at risk.....Dr.

David Elkind, noted child development expert, theorizes that a faster speed of life characterized by instant access to information via the Internet and to each other through cell phones has garnered a sense that people can do more, leading to booking more commitments for children. In addition, this acceleration of life has contributed to the idea that earlier is better leading to more academics for young children.”[1]

Just as this increased speed of modern technological life leads to increased levels of stress and stress-related disorders for adults, so it also leads to increased levels of stress, over-stimulation and overwhelm for young children. Research confirms an increase in experiences of stress and stress-related behavior in children. [2]. Challenging behaviors, such as defiance, aggressivity, lack of concentration and attention, impulsivity, uncontrollable behaviors, tantrums and more result when children surpass their threshold of stress tolerance and enter into a dysregulated state.

According to the “Stress Model”, developed by social worker/ therapist Bryan Post, all of these behaviors, for which other fields have developed medicalized labels and treatments such as “ADHD”, “ADD”, “Oppositional Defiant Disorder” etc, are linked to states of stress and affect dysregulation. [3] Thus, it is critically important for adults to understand their role in helping children to regulate. In addition, skills for self-regulation are important modern life-skills that are often completely neglected in most early-childhood care settings.

F. Allen Walker MD states “Many schools and teachers are not able to keep up with the different learning styles of students. Learning through imagination and creative curiosity (which I find inherent in kids with ADHD) is disappearing in many schools.... I feel everyone experiences symptoms of ADHD to varying degrees at some point during his or her life, and the current fast-paced culture seems to propagate the ADHD phenomenon.” [4]

Indeed, the rate of prescribing psycho-active drugs for ADHD is rising at alarming rates. When Terrance Woodworth, on behalf of the US Drug Enforcement Administration testified before Congress on the use of Ritalin, he presented the fact that between 1991 and 1999, US sales of methylphenidate and amphetamine had increased by nearly 500%. [5]

Neohumanist Education: adapting to new life skills for modern children

This leads to an important question - in what ways must educational approaches adapt to help children to successfully integrate in a high speed, information rich world? Lars Dencik, of Roskild University states “Changes in the life-conditions of children growing up today can be expected to take place continuously, in almost all spheres of life and at an accelerating pace.” He encourages further reflection on adapting educational practices suitably: “... education should serve the interests of the child by rendering the child competent to master the life challenges that not yesterday's, nor even today's, but future life conditions may pose. The children of today will undoubtedly meet different challenges from those we had as we grew up.”[6] Neohumanist education offers a holistic response, as it is designed to equip children with the flexible thinking, creative imagination, self-regulation skills, and sense of spiritual connection to the world and those around them that children need to effectively face the 21st century.

Neohumanist Education is an outgrowth of the philosophy of Neohumanism which was introduced by Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar in 1982. Sarkar (1921-1990) was a social activist, composer, educational innovator, and spiritual philosopher based in India. His life work centered on creating a rights-based society, not only for human beings but also for the entire ecological system. He worked for a caste-free, dogma-free, rational society, and focused on early childhood education as the critical period in which the human being's basic world outlook is being shaped, and in which such a holistic paradigm is most easily nurtured.

As Neohumanist Education originated in India, it is an educational philosophy deeply rooted in a socio-cultural context that gives importance not only to external, material development, but also to the careful and systematic cultivation of a rich inner life. However, Neohumanist Education has not remained a culturally isolated phenomenon limited to India, rather it has flourished abroad, achieving a progressive blend of eastern subjective approach and western objective approach. P.R. Sarkar explains in detail these two aspects of our faculty of knowledge: “The subjectivated mind is the witnessing counterpart of the objectivated mind, and may get its objects both from the external physical world and the internal psychic world. Whenever an action of knowing takes place within the arena of the mind a portion of it plays the subjective role and another portion the objective role.” [7] Unlike other eastern philosophies that exclusively give importance to the cultivation of the subjective, introversial powers of the mind, denying the material world as an illusion, Sarkar's spiritual philosophy

encourages embracing both in a practical and balanced way– nurturing awareness of one’s inner experience, but also developing an engaged attitude of service towards the relative world.

Daniel Goleman’s seminal work on Emotional Intelligence, has already challenged the existing educational paradigm that has traditionally emphasized academics, by positing that possessing certain skills such as good communication, self-control, zeal and self-motivation are more important indicators for success in life than IQ. [8] Neohumanist Education builds on this perspective, keeping in mind that the goal of education is not just to prepare children to become economically productive, responsible members of society, but rather to help them to construct values that are eventually able lead them towards the full realization of their human potential. According to the ancient wisdom tradition of yoga, there are three fundamental aspects of human nature that must be fully expressed to achieve lasting happiness and self-realization: Vistara - the passion for learning and discovery, including self-discovery, Seva - the sense of meaningfulness that comes from finding an altruistic way to contribute to the welfare of others, and Rasa - the sense harmony, belonging and flow that comes from having an inner relationship to the Higher Self and connection to a greater whole. The clarity that comes from having a clear goal offers flexibility to Neohumanist Education practitioners around the world to adapt curriculum and methodology to fit local contexts in culturally appropriate ways. Another unique aspect of the Neohumanist Education is the approach towards moral education. Rather than seeing values as something to be instilled from the outside, Neohumanist Education has a fundamentally positive view of the inherent goodness of every human being and seeks to awaken the intuitive voice of conscience and the practice of listening to one’s heart and applying critical thinking, rather than simply learning to obey external authority – or even commercial influences, especially when these influences can be driven by interests, prejudices or social injustice.

Neohumanist Education in Practice

The practical application of this philosophy in Neohumanist kindergartens around the world, is found in the integration of special “Quiet Time” moments during morning circle, in which small children learn to sense their breathing, to enjoy the magic of quietness. Simple guided imagery is used, as well as specific songs that are associated with these peaceful moments. The power of imagination is further developed by creative visualization exercises. As brief and deceptively simple as these centering moments are, they provide an important opportunity to exercise the child’s ability to self-regulate and experience tranquility and love from within. Centering moments enhance concentration, and prepare the child for cognitive activities.

The art of positive thinking is also nurtured through the use of affirmations and empathetic communication. The teacher works not only to prepare an aesthetically pleasing environment, but also works to create an affirming, positive psychic atmosphere through the choice of songs, stories, and content that reflect values of love and connection. Sarkar’s view was “Real education leads to a pervasive sense of love and compassion for all creation”. [9]

Simplified versions of yoga exercises are also introduced in a creative, playful way. These sessions are followed by a self-massage, useful for helping the child to connect to and care for his own body, and concluded with a deep relaxation exercise incorporating guided imagery.

A study entitled “Yoga for children in the mirror of the science” at Leipzig University, Germany demonstrated significant benefits from integrating a similar yoga program in a primary school setting. Children that received relaxation training “could stabilize on a higher level in the fields of the personality that are relevant for stress coping.”[10]

The key role of the teacher’s personal example

The successful implementation of Neohumanist Education in the classroom, however depends not on specific methodologies as much as it depends on the teacher’s own conscious and holistic process of self-development. Only a regulated adult can soothe dysregulated children, and be creatively responsive to the child’s needs during behavioral crisis. It is important to respond, rather than to react – and this requires the subjective ability to observe one’s own stress and fear as children start to act out. It then requires the presence of mind that comes from regular practice, to self-regulate by breathing and shifting perspective from the behavior itself to what is driving the behavior. In fact, Heather Forbes and Bryan Post advocate the use of “time-in” rather than “time-out”, as children with

challenging behaviors are actually communicating their need for assistance in returning to regulation by the empathetic intervention of a soothing adult figure. [11]

Research into mirror neurons has shown that the brain is neurologically hardwired for empathy. These “mirror neurons” reflect back an action we observe in someone else, making us mimic that action or have the impulse to do so.” Our natural tendency is to be empathetic and helpful, but this can get overshadowed by states of stress, fear and overwhelm. [12] This again underlines the need for both children and adults to learn specific stress management skills so that they can reconnect, both with themselves, and with others in order to achieve self regulation, and access to their higher and more subtle human qualities.

Protecting childhood

Thomas Merton observed: “The modern child may in the beginning of his conscious life begin to show natural and spontaneous signs of spirituality. He may have imagination, originality, a simple and individual freshness of response to reality, and even a tendency to moments of thoughtful silence and absorption. But all these qualities are quickly destroyed by the fears, anxieties, and compulsions to conform which come at him from all directions.... He becomes a yelling, brash, false little monster, brandishing a toy gun and dressed up like some character he has seen on television. His head is filled with inane slogans, songs, noises, explosions, statistics, brand names, menaces, ribaldries, and cliches. When he gets to school he learns to verbalize, to rationalize, to pose, to make faces like an advertisement, to need a car, and in short to go through life with an empty head, conforming to others like himself, in "togetherness". [13]

Similarly, Neohumanist Education rejects superficial, commercialized “pseudoculture”, and seeks to create a subtle atmosphere in which the inherent spirituality of the child can blossom. However, rather than completely condemning technological culture and scientific advances, Neohumanism chooses a balanced stance. It aims to equip children with the skills to successfully navigate this very prominent aspect of reality, and learn to use technological tools in beneficial ways.

The origin of the word kindergarten in German translates to “children’s garden”. This metaphor evokes the image of a garden of tender saplings that must be protected and cultivated with careful attention. Similarly, PR Sarkar states: "If one receives the fundamentals of education in the formative period of one's life, one will keep oneself all right in the teeth of the greatest trials and tribulations in life. A bamboo, when green, can be shaped or bent in any way you like. Once it ripens, any attempt to reshape it will break it." [14] Educating balance from an early age, is an essential factor in preparing children for a happy, fulfilled life with the inner resources needed for to thrive in the midst of the stresses of the modern world.

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