

It's time to cultivate...



by Paulina Bánfalvi Kam

Thirty years ago a young teacher came to my school. He taught us to think, to debate, to reason, to explore, to relate. Lessons with him were different because of an important principle. They made one feel better. They led one to understand what had to be done to improve, what the reasons were for not reaching a particular performance or knowledge, and offered the tools to go further.

That young teacher is Joan Vaello, author of the book "How to teach those who don't want to". His book is not a utopia; it is not a theoretical proposal. It details what he has put into practice over many years in the classroom. He believed that all his students could achieve it, and that

was the reason why he did it. Joan Vaello, without knowing it, perhaps without remembering it, is "guilty" of me discovering my talent and my vocation. The day he spoke to us about subliminal psychology, human behaviour, persuasion and thought, a new window opened in me. I still remember that moment.

We cannot know who we are impacting in our classrooms, nor the weight of our actions on the future lives of our students, what our positive influence is, but neither can we know what our negative effect is. Teaching is not a job for everyone. Teaching requires taking responsibility for the fact that your actions, your words, your decisions, your criteria, can mark the lives of many young people.

Crises always reveal strengths and weaknesses. This one has made it clear that teachers are willing to stand firm and endure. Still, it has also shown the shortcomings of a system that does not yet understand the needs of its students and where the differential value of a teacher lies. In our present context, none of the

taken measures reveals the teacher as something more than a simple guardian or a dispenser of "canned" content in textbooks.

But they have understood this. And the families, many of them, are demanding it. Education is finally at the centre of the analysis; families, the press, society has clamoured. We want an education that will allow our children to perform with confidence in this turbulent 21st century. We want an education that personalises.

And what is this personalisation? Do we need more resources, lower the ratio, reduce the curriculum, eliminate standards? Personalising is nothing more than organising our educational

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structures, times, forms and objectives around our students, their needs, those of them and putting our work as teachers at the service of the student and not the system. It should be obvious to say that we do not work for our pupils. Yet, it is tragically necessary to point it out: many have never conceived any education other than adapting and shaping students to the system and not the other way round.

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The following phrases are often heard concerning students in the first years of primary school: “that child has to understand that the class has a rhythm”, “this girl does not finish when she should”, “he is smart, but his handwriting is illegible”, “he is distracted by drawing in class”, “I must continually scold him to sit down”, “his answers do not fit what we ask”, “he asks a lot”, “he asks little”, “he is slow”... None of these comments refers to rebellious teenagers: despite them being that young, we have already forgotten that our job is not judging or labelling them, nor certify that they conform up to a standard someone designed, probably sitting in an office, with the sole objective of squaring a template in which to distribute and place learning standards.

Our job is to drive their development. Just as the work of a doctor, a sports trainer, a farmer or a cattleman. A winegrower periodically visits his vineyards but not “disdaining” those grapes that do not develop according to fixed growth and ripening marks, nor of neglecting those that go “too fast”. The winegrower does not cut



down a vine if the first month has not developed as expected, nor does he neglect those “above mature average”. He knows that there are many things to be done to improve development conditions. Still, the time to make decisions about the fate of each bunch will come when the grapes have reached maturity.

Vineyards are visited to observe their fruits, analyse their needs and the reason for those requirements: Has the time come to move on to the next phase? Does it need to be pruned or harvested? Does it get less sun? Does its part of the land receive less water? Does it need an additional dose of fertiliser? Has it been attacked by an insect and needs to be protected? What would happen if I did a graft here or pruned this or that part? What if I added this or another fertiliser? Despite his experience, he analyses and learns by observing how his plants react: he knows that he can be wrong, that dozens of factors can vary and affect the development of each of his vines every vine, harvest, or year. He knows that he is a good grower not only because he gets everything right, and when his vines develop entirely on their own according to the expected ripening at any given time. But he is a better farmer as he observes his vines ripening, treats each one differently, understands it from its starting point, its particular circumstances, and the development it shows as a reaction to those conditions he has created and which he continuously adapts to ensure the best possible outcome.

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The winegrower makes an extra effort on specific conditions of the land: when there is a complicated situation; when environmental conditions are adverse; in years of drought; when the cold has not been enough; insects have been more voracious; the wind has blown too soon. He knows that this is when his vines need him most.

However, we have forgotten to ask ourselves what can be done in education in order to favour the development of a student, to adapt the context so that other student can develop his or her potential, the tools placed at his or her disposal, to accompany him or her in the complex task of growing up. From their early years, students are told to have “deficiencies”: certifications are often offered at the beginning of their process; they are assessed and said whether they are suitable or not at each step, but generally without a clear idea of how much of their development depends on the context and tools that we put at their disposal.

Growing, learning and developing our potential are processes for which we are co-responsible together with the families. What tools are there in our hands? What part of that context can we modify so that our “vines” develop in the best conditions?

Learn about them. The first step is to forget about labels and the ideal student that one expects them all to resemble. Some teachers may still follow a pattern where the needs of the students are outlined by asking



themselves “I have a child with ADHD, or lazy, or with high ability, or with dyslexia, or who has difficulty reading: what can do?”. If only a variable defines a student, the richness of the picture is lost. The answer to any of the questions is in their profile. Analyse their fortitudes and offer them the most significant challenge possible. Because developing strengths gives the required self-esteem and confidence to work through and overcome difficulties. Discover their interests (stimulating them) because passions are like “the wind that blows the sailboat”, it helps to flow, to go through the challenges of learning with ease.

Offer continuous feedback. It is one of the tools with the most significant impact on students (Visible thinking, J. Hattie). Suppose we observe how our students perform during the process of learning and carrying out tasks; we will be able to: understand where their difficulties lie, what their gaps or blocks are, which areas of their strengths and learning strategies require specific tools and application, what the origin of their behaviour or attitudes is, and act on them in time.

“We cannot decide what challenges our students will present each year, but we can decide how we are going to respond to them.”

- Carol A. Tomlinson

Expand the why. The causes of poor performance, inattention, lack of involvement or motivation, restlessness, anxiety, or rebellion are multiple, and almost always the result of a combination of many factors. However, we are often quick to judge and reduce the causes to two: the family and the child. If he does not pay attention, it is the learner who “has” attention deficit. However, the most frequent reason is a bored student and that the content does not challenge his curiosity, his imagination or his ability to think in a complex way. If the student does not finish the tasks, he or she is “lazy”, but “lazy” is a reaction to a context, not an innate quality. Learners may disconnect from learning because of negative experiences, either because they did not have tools to perform as expected or because the challenge was beyond his or her capacity. We will find a way to modify the context if we check their reasons, history, if we ask questions and get closer to their reality. By doing so, their attitude and involvement will change.

Commitment to deductive learning. We have heard for a long

time that the student must be the protagonist and that we need active learning models. For many, this has translated into the incorporation of project and/or cooperative learning in its different aspects. Still, not so many have understood that this does not only refer to the student doing something more than listening in the classroom but mainly thinking and deciding. Two verbs which, if accompanied by imagination and curiosity, undoubtedly lead to motivation and significant and lasting learning. We need to get used to the fact that it is they who learn and not we who teach. Two verbs which, if accompanied by imagination and curiosity, undoubtedly lead to motivation and significant and lasting learning. We need to get used to the fact that it is they who learn and not we who teach. Generally, questions and the student’s contributions, debates and reflections offer students more than endless presentations. It is also the case when we gain time and space for the observation of their profiles and needs, for diversity, for the different rhythms of learning, to let each one go as far as they wish and that their impulse, now without

brakes or limits, drags and stimulates the rest of their companions.

There are many more elements in which we can go deeper to shape a personalised education. Still, these four pillars are the starting point to regard our “vines” as developing crops, and our work as that of a hard-working farmer who observes growth to support it, looking for where he can intervene to improve, as he is convinced that every one of his vines has the potential to form part of the exquisite broth that will bear his stamp.

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