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THOUGHT PROVOKING IDEAS OF THE GLOBAL ESSAY COMPETITION 2022

Let the Students Teach

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Introduction

All education involves an interchange, but it seems as if we have lost the “inter” part of it. In today’s traditional education systems, one gives or receives depending on the side of the room one is standing. You are either a student or a teacher, you either teach or learn, speak or listen.

This frontal education format creates a vertical relationship that is not only found inside the classrooms, but all the way from the government down, in every level of the system. Which usually means that older generations lead the system for the younger ones. Authors like Catherine Bonvalet (2016) have said that in the intergenerational contract, even though “each individual is situated in a generation susceptible to give or receive”, the exchanges are so complex that “it is difficult to distinguish the helper from the helped”. At schools, we box the helper and the helped.

In this essay we will argue that the hierarchal relationship configuration adds to some of the main limitations of our current education system, and we will present a simple, yet powerful idea to take advantage of the exchanges that take place in schools, as we shift towards a more horizontal, holistic and “inter” education system.

Limitations of the current system

The restraints of the centralized, top-down decisions made around education are reflected in some limitations. We will use some examples to revise three of them: slow curricular adaptation, difficulty to pivot to new educational tools and student standardization.

One of our times most complex challenges is the climate crisis. Since the half of the twentieth century, humanity started gaining evidence and publishing papers and books about climate change (Black, 2013). We would assume that by now, with the rising popularity

of young activists, climate change is widely and profoundly taught in every school.

Journalist Katie Worth found evidence that climate change isn't being taught in many schools of the U.S. Even worse, she found "some teachers are providing misleading, outdated or false information" (Lohan, 2021). If we have known about this topic for more than 50 years and it's still not embraced by our education system, what should we expect for more dramatic changes?

Another important limitation of our current system is the slow adoption of new technologies. While in some developed countries schools are very well equipped with new technologies, the OECD has found that 47% of teachers were not letting students use information and communication technologies for class work, and many of them never received training to use them (Loi, 2020). On the other hand, Ofcom, the UK's communication regulator, found that digital understanding is best between 14 and 15-year-olds, and then it goes down through adulthood (Garside, 2014). This knowledge gap presents a true interchange opportunity.

The third limitation is standardization. My 15-year-old cousin Ariela is a music prodigy, and I have seen her fail at school and hate it since kindergarten. She was even "diagnosed" by the school with a type of attention deficit disorder (ADD) and they advised her mother to medicate her. Ariela was only 6 years old.

Sadly, we can tell by the rising number of ADD diagnosed children that hers is the story of many (ADDitude, 2022). Which is just one example of how instead of embracing diversity, our education system insists we treat students as a homogeneous mix. In a brilliant essay, Ken Robinson (2019) states that "formal education has been systematically biased towards narrow forms of academic ability. The result is that it largely disregards the marvelous diversity of human talents and interests". Ariela hasn't found a place inside her school that celebrates her talent, and her teachers don't have much room to maneuver as they have directives,

government officials and standardized testing in every corner.

As we have seen, the vertical structure that controls our education system has its limitations. Despite many efforts to reform education, most of the schools around the globe remain the same: teachers teach, and students learn. What if we could take a step that did not require the whole system to change? What could we do to shift to a more horizontal intergenerational relationship?

Let the Students Teach

Let the Students Teach (LST) is an initiative that consists in giving a space for students to share what they are passionate, curious, and concerned about. It is taking a time to switch the classroom roles and experience a different dynamic, where students pick whatever topic they want, and share it in a way that makes sense for them. This initiative involves a simple action that will allow the vertical, hierarchical relationship we have described before to slowly transform into a true interchange.

Let the Students Teach, why?

LST encourages students to talk about their concerns, talents and passions with their peers, teachers, directors, parents or even the entire community. This helps bring the current topics into the academic conversation, and fosters, as Ken Robinson (2019) would say, "young peoples' natural appetites for learning". For example, after hearing what the students care about, a physics teacher could give a skyscraper enthusiast a building project, a math teacher could give my cousin Ariela Bach's mathematical harmonies to study, and Greta Thunberg's teachers could exponentiate her social organization skills.

Moreover, LST spaces can be used to support teachers in understanding technological tools, and students could teach them! Sugata Mitra proved that kids have an outstanding capacity to understand technology fast and without any help. He did this by leaving computers in remote places in India, saying to

the kids that they could use it, and returning a few months later to find them using the computers it to play and to “teach themselves” (Mitra, 2013). Tech is a perfect area where students could engage with their teachers and develop communication skills, as they teach them to use new technologies.

LST also takes a step to education personalization. A step to a new model where, as Shane Safir and Jamila Dugan (2021) explain, we shift from looking for “what’s wrong” with our students, to looking and celebrating “what’s right” with them. This way, they argue, we showcase their genius, and sum the student voice to the educational network.

Let the Students Teach, how?

The global education system is complex and diverse. One of the advantages of Let the Students Teach is the flexibility to adapt to many schools’ profiles, to be implemented at various scales and incorporated in different formats.

LST can take place in urban or rural contexts, in remote or in-person schools and for every education stage. It only takes the teachers’ initiative to find the time and invite students to voluntarily participate. A teacher in an in-person, rural primary school could give 10 minutes a day for a student or group of students to come up to the front and teach. A post-graduate teacher in a remote university could give 30 minutes a week for students to present their doctorate thesis topic or favorite book. Teachers could even open a social media page where students post videos of themselves explaining whatever they are passionate about.

The “classes” the students give can be in front of their peers and teacher, or extent to an event where all teachers, directives, and community gathers. It is important to highlight that LTS is not like a science fair; it is not mandatory, and teachers do not guide the topics. Teachers, as we have said before, just provide the space and listen.

So, the teacher is in the student’s seat. Now what? What do the students do? How do they teach? Well, what and however they want. Some students might want to present together a dance project they are working on, another student might show you her social media page where she shares homemade chemistry experiments, and another student may want to divide his football conference in three parts. The trick is to take the first step to Let the Students Teach and let the context and the students shape how the initiative will work for them.

Potential obstacles

Like every initiative and project, LST has some potential limitations that we can anticipate. Given the scope of this essay, we will only address three of them: participation, time and will.

If you have ever been a teacher, you know that motivation and participation are not easy to encourage. If exchanging some class time for LST is not enough for students to get excited, teachers can try other ways to incentive participation. Some ideas are to find a place outside the classroom for the sessions, invite students directly or make sessions only for teachers and no peers. Maybe, little by little, students will loosen up and fight for the weekly LST spot. The only rule is, do not make it mandatory or give it academic weight.

Although LST sessions could take only 10 minutes a week, we understand that teachers have big academic curriculums to finish, and it is not always easy to take class time. If a teacher is in this position, we recommend them to talk to the students and find a time that works for everybody: group lunch sessions, staying after school once every month or trimester, or even a social media page for LST videos.

As we have said before, LST is an easy initiative to implement without having to wait on the entire system to change. Although it can be done at a class level, and we encourage teachers in very centralized school systems to try it, we think the best way to implement it is at school level. Having the

whole school disposed to embrace LST will not only help teachers with the operativity of the sessions, but it will also help the initiative reach its full potential.

Conclusions

Let the Students Teach is a step towards a new interrelationship paradigm. It will strengthen the link between generations, foment empathy and create community. Having a space for the students to teach and switching roles is a fun, simple and powerful tool for the education system.

As the LST community grows, we hope it becomes a platform to share experiences, an echo of students' voices and even a force that helps shape public policy around the globe.

For students, Let the Students Teach will give us an opportunity to share what we know while encouraging us to follow our passions. For teachers, it will help us realize how special and peculiar everyone is, while we learn and relearn.

Teachers, imagine what we could learn from them. Students, imagine what they could learn from us.

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