

Linda Lantieri: “We need to teach children to manage their anxiety as well as teaching them math and science”

The New York teacher, author of books such as *Building Emotional Intelligence* highlights that “the most important thing is for parents to spend time with their children”

(photo caption): New York teacher Linda Lantieri during her recent trip to Spain

Author of books such as *Building Emotional Intelligence*, Linda Lantieri has returned to Spain on the invitation of Fundación Balia for children. This New York teacher teaches children to “concentrate and calm their bodies”. Ultimately, it’s about listening to the great song by Crosby, Still, Nash and Young: "Teach your children well". In other words, kids need to be taught how to manage their anxiety as well as learning math and science.

Why did you become a teacher?

It was a time in the U.S., in the middle of the civil rights movement (I've been teaching for over 40 years), when I felt that each one of us should take a stand about how we were going to contribute to changing things. My choice was to become a teacher in order to influence children, and I began in Spanish Harlem, El Barrio, where I worked as teacher and principal.

What did you learn in East Harlem?

“It was a time when we were losing what would be equivalent to a classroom full of children to violence every three days”

The first thing I learned during those years is that although many of the children came from poor families, they had an entire community behind them who cared for them. When I walked from the subway station to the school, a bunch of people greeted me in Spanish, the churches were open for the kids to get help, there were spaces such as this one, Fundacion Balia para la Infancia, where they could go, and although they came from poor environments, I had the feeling that I wasn't working on my own, that I had the whole community behind me.

Did the violence you had to live with make you rethink what you were doing and could be doing through education?

We in the United States went through periods of violence in which we would lose what would be the equivalent to a whole classroom full of children every three days. It’s hard to believe, but that’s the way it was, because of the violence occurring all over the U.S., especially in the big cities, and in the area where I was working as well. Of course there were times when I was very worried, but it was clear to me that this was the place where I was supposed to be.

What are meditation exercises?

We still do not have an adequate term for what we are discovering in the field of neuroscience, especially with respect to teaching young people to train their own minds. It's about the skills that children and youth acquire, with our help, to focus their attention and calm their bodies. Many people call these activities meditation exercises. But that may not be the term we end up using.

In Spain, it may cause confusion.

Exactly, that's why I don't use it in my talks here [such as the one she gave as part of a panel that included José Antonio Marina and other speakers, during "New Horizons in Education" Symposium organized by Fundación Balia por la Infancia at the Caixa Forum; instead I use terms such as focusing attention and relaxing the body. When we train the mind to be calm and relaxed, then we are better able to handle stress.

Do you share Nicholas Carr's views about the negative aspects of the Internet and social networks, that they foster distraction and shallowness, and that this is in fact affecting our brain?

"The new age of technology is here to stay"

I think there is absolutely no doubt that the new age of technology is here to stay. However, as adults, we should take on a decisive role in the way young people use technology. I have personally dealt with the problem of cyberbullying with children. We don't know to what degree children's brains are affected by the constant use of the Internet, and at what age. But I don't believe that very small children should be using computers, unlike many parents who think the opposite, that it's a good thing. There are many things we don't know and that we should try to foresee. We need more research on the subject. What we do know is that exposure to computer screens is not good for the brains of smaller children.

You are not against introducing computers in the classroom, as long as they are used intelligently.

I'm in favor of using them with moderation. Children learn to use emotional intelligence, social and emotional learning--in other words, to relate to others and discover who they are--in the same way we are doing right now: by talking face to face. When you send an electronic message, you haven't the faintest idea of the level of emotion it entails or will trigger. You cannot see it in the other person's face.

But do you think it's possible to pay attention in this digital world plagued with distraction 24 hours a day, 7 days a week?

I'm very concerned. Kids are less and less able to focus attention on the present moment and on one particular task.

Will our children have a worse life than ours?

That's something we are also concerned about in the U.S., both in terms of stress and health as well as the economic situation. I think so, and that's our job, to guide our children well. We need to work hard at it.

Should we be talking more about non-material things (spirituality, if you will) than about material things (productiveness)?

That's it. Youth are facing a world of much violence, abuse, the predominance of material things, and this makes it harder. We must foster love of non-material things, spending time with them, which is the most important thing. Children are not seeing people solving their problems in peaceful ways. That's why the events in Egypt are so important-- it was an example of resolving problems without resorting to violence. Children need those models. But they are not getting them.

Is our educational system teaching ways to manage the frustrations of students (and teachers), or is it doing just the opposite?

I think it would help if schools were viewed as an opportunity to not only teach academic knowledge (math, language, history) as vital skills, but also to teach young people how to relate to others and control their emotions. That helps manage frustration. But many schools around the world do not see that need, they have a much narrower vision of education.

What is emotional learning?

Social and emotional learning is a process through which children and adults gain more awareness when it comes to managing their emotions, in order to relate better to others and be more prepared to make good decisions. It's a battery of skills that, as Daniel Goleman says in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, are as important for life and work as the regular academic subjects. A student can get excellent grades and yet fail in life, be incapable of making friends, of relating to people who are different, of managing their anger, of dealing with stress.

Are these new concepts being accepted by Congress, by academic institutions, by American society in general?

It's a new thing, but the good news is that, as part of CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) we are taking a great step forward, since we have received a grant from the NoVo Foundation, linked to Warren Buffett, which is supporting these efforts.

Do you think the new tenant in the White House shares this vision?

I would say he's starting to see it, but still has a narrow vision.

Is emotional intelligence an instrument to mask the dirty face of capitalism?

(Laughing out loud) I hope not! However, every good idea, like this one, can be used maliciously. But we then wouldn't consider it emotional intelligence, because emotional intelligence teaches us to be compassionate towards others, and emotional intelligence includes social justice. The risk is there, but that's why we would always include compassion, altruism, and social justice in teaching emotional intelligence.

What is resilience and why is it important?

It's something we have, which consists of the ability to find within you the resources to recuperate from misfortune and get back to the person you were. It's about not only helping the 8,000 New York children who had to run for their lives on 9-11, it's about going beyond where you were, learning from dramatic experiences. As Ernest Hemingway said, "We all experience the world breaking us but some are made stronger in the broken places". You can teach children ways to increase their resilience.

How do you nurture inner resilience?

By creating the emotional environment that children need, and also providing silence in order to focus the mind. It's about creating a strong internal core inside each child. When I create a space for introspection it's like making a deposit at the bank, and I will be able to use it at a time of need, when adversity strikes.

Are our schools working for society or is there a great gap between what is taught and real life?

"Many schools resemble factories, with the bells and rhythms of a production line."

There is a terrible gap. I don't feel we are really preparing kids for the real world. That's why I say that many schools still resemble factories, with the bells and rhythms of a production line. We need leaders who encourage us to become world citizens, who teach people to relate to people, to others. We are not preparing children for the world they are going to have to face.

What is neuroplasticity?

A decade ago, researchers of the mind began to discover that our brain forms itself through our experiences. Formerly, we thought that the brain was not evolving [this thought was shared by Ramón y Cajal, as Nicholas Carr recalls in his book *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains*]. Now we know, for better or for worse that many soldiers returning from Afghanistan and Iraq come back with traumas that have changed their brain structure. We also see that in those of us who practice meditation regularly, that part of the brain, the one that controls decisions, is clearer, more capable of concentrating.

Experiences mold our minds.

That's the news. If a child begins to experience that peace and tranquility, their deposit in the brain bank grows. And when something stressful or unpleasant happens to them, they don't react automatically.

Who is Linda Lantieri?

(Laughs again). I like the question. Linda Lantieri is a compassionate person who hopes that what she does each day can make a difference. Linda Lantieri is a person who chooses to be in the right place at the right time with the right people and does what she's supposed to do to improve the world. If everyone did what they were supposed to do, we could create a kinder world for everyone.

That's the beginning of a revolution.

I think we are in the middle of a revolution.

Born in New York City 63 years ago, Linda Lantieri learned her first skills as a teacher in Spanish Harlem. She has covered all the steps of the school system ladder. A shootout at a school that ended the life of a young man moved a New York Times reporter named Daniel Goleman to interview Linda, who was then teaching peaceful conflict resolution in the public schools. "Students Learn Lessons of Emotional Life" was the title of the *Times* article. It was at the time Daniel Goleman was writing his bestseller "Emotional Intelligence" and of a fruitful collaboration between them developed.