



## REDEFINING THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION WITH LINDA LANTIERI



**LINDA LANTIERI** is an activist, educator, author, and internationally known expert in social and emotional learning. She is co-founder, with Tom Roderick, and founding director of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP) of Educators for Social Responsibility. Lantieri has been a Fulbright Scholar and Fetzer Fellow. Her recent publications include *Waging Peace in Our Schools* with Janet Patti (1998) and the editing of *Schools with Spirit: Nurturing the Inner Lives of*

*Children and Teachers* (2001), both published by Beacon Press. Lantieri spoke with BRC publications manager Patti M. Marxsen about how education must change in the 21st century.

**You have said that “my professional life is my calling.” When did you first realize this and what have you learned about responding to a call?**

I have always felt that my life had some deeper meaning and purpose to it. Even when I began teaching in East Harlem in 1968, I felt that my professional life was my calling. I also felt that when I became an assistant principal and then became director of a middle school in East Harlem, and later when I began teaching at Hunter College. I consider it a great blessing that my vocation—my voice in the world—and my avocation, that which calls me, have never been separated.

**How do you think your inner self developed so that it could speak to you so clearly?**

I grew up in a faith-based home. By nineteen I was a daily meditator and am to this day. There was a part of me that decided early on that my inner life was important and needed to be nurtured.

I also have a capacity to see the day-to-dayness of things in the pre-

sent but also see how the day-to-day contributes to a bigger vision. I love the quote of Martin Luther King, Jr., that I have in my office: “Keep your eyes on the prize and carry on.” That comes fairly naturally to me, even though I’ve been shaken a bit by the events of September 11th. My office is in Ground Zero, which has become the new neighborhood name, and I see the devastation around us on a daily basis.

**In your book entitled “Waging Peace,” you state: “Our society needs a new way of thinking about what it means to be an educated person.” What do you mean by that and does your new definition include the capacity to connect the details to a larger vision?**

The way we have been educating our young people is not necessarily preparing them for today’s world. Our vision of an educated person is primarily connected to the details of intellectual competency, academic development, and high test scores. We have to expand this if we are going to prepare young people for the

twenty-first century that they’re in and for the dilemmas they are going to face as world citizens. For me, being an educated person includes much more than our intellectual development. Daniel Goleman gave us a glimpse of that in his groundbreaking book, *Emotional Intelligence*. He calls it “EQ,” which stands for “emotional quotient,” and he defines EQ as a way of describing our interpersonal skills, such things as integrity and empathy. I would suggest that these skills, which relate to our heart and our inner life, may be as important as IQ for success in our personal and public lives.

The point is that while young people may be measured on standardized tests and while they may even do well on those tests, they may still not be prepared for the tests of life. Right now, we have a system of education that is not educating young people for putting our lives and our actions in a wider and richer context.

**As we enter a new era of education reform with the recently signed reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, we enter an intensified environment of accountability. Where do you stand on the standards debate and how do you feel about the annual testing that will soon be required by law for every child every year in reading and math, grades 3 to 8?**

We’re definitely in a challenging time in education and we want our young people to be more successful, but the new legislation is based on a short-sighted vision. We’re making a dramatic equation here: academic achievement and school success = standardized testing.

I'd like to add that I don't think that explicit standards are bad. My concern is the assumption that we can measure what we need to know well through testing and standardization. And then the wider vision of education—which includes educating young people's hearts and spirits—goes to the back burner. We are missing the awareness that emotional, social, and spiritual development are clearly connected to academic achievement.

What we need, in general, is an alternative way of assessment, where we are being held accountable for a higher form of learning. We need standards that stress the importance of demonstrating the kind of competencies of mind and heart that can be publicly reviewed. This is part of what I'm working on now, helping to develop standards in the field of social and emotional learning.

**What would some of those standards be?**

The standards we're talking about are standards that have to do with identifying one's emotions, managing one's emotions, and then seeing how those emotions can effectively help to problem solve. Those are the concepts, but within those concepts are skills: Can the young person actively listen? Is the student able to say what s/he needs and feels by using an "I" message without putting the other person down?

And then there are skills in the areas of diversity and bias-awareness. Our young people need to be aware of prejudice and discrimination but they also need to have the skills to interrupt that prejudice and discrimination.

**You are well-known as the co-founder, with Tom Roderick, of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP), a program now established in over 400 American schools under the auspices of Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR). What motivated you to create**

**this program and has it become what you envisioned in the beginning?**

I started as a classroom teacher and then an administrator at the elementary and middle school level. By the time I went to work at the Central Board of Education in New York in the early 1980s, I began to see some troubling signs that others were seeing as well. Kids were coming to school more angry, more troubled, more depressed, and more impulsive. Very soon after these trends were identified, we began to have the nationwide crisis of youth violence in the schools that we all saw escalate in the 1990s.

RCCP started in 1985 as a preventive measure. But from the beginning, we believed that schools should be places that help people develop intellectual competency and, at the same time, address other things that infringe on learning. We could see the importance of not only addressing emotional and social development, but nurturing it in much more concrete ways than we had done in the past. If we did that, we thought we might even see an improvement in academic ability.

**What have you learned through this work?**

We've learned so many things. I know we have contributed to creating more nonviolent young people, many of whom are now adults who will be able to solve problems—even world problems—without resorting to violence. I'm also happy to say that we now have one of the largest research studies in the field of conflict resolution encompassing over 5,000 young people in which we learned that young people who had a substantial number of lessons in the RCCP curriculum were able to be less violent and more caring. But what we also found out is that those young people did better on their standardized math and reading tests. So not only have



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we observed successes in the inspiring things we've seen happening around us, but we also have scientific evidence that tells us there's a strong link between social and emotional learning and academic achievement. [See studies by J. L. Aber, J. Brown, and C. C. Hendrich (NY: Columbia University, 1999) Joseph L. Mailman School of Public Health, National Center for Children in Poverty.]

What I didn't envision is how long it would take for the exception to become the rule. Four hundred schools out of over 90,000 schools in the United States is a very small drop in a very big ocean. What I hoped was that, by now, we would make some bigger steps in the direction of a more integrated approach to education. What I'm seeing instead is a very simplistic view of what we need to know to tell us we're successful in our schools.

**Does that make you feel that your work has been unsuccessful?**

Not necessarily unsuccessful, but I think we do need to shift to more advocacy and education directed at the general public. Clearly, it's the general public of parents and citizens in general who shape what schools are doing, not to mention the world of big business. That's where we need to do more work

**What are some of the basic skills that can be acquired that parents and others need to know about?**

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## Guest Interview

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First of all, the skills we're talking about are communication skills.

There are also problem-solving skills involved like negotiation and mediation. There are skills of caring communication, being able to create an environment where we begin to feel connection and community. It also includes skills in appreciating and understanding diversity and being in a place where you can move from being a bystander to being the one who knows how to interrupt or intervene when you see behavior that is prejudiced and discriminatory.

**The book you edited last year entitled *Schools with Spirit* (Beacon, 2001) focuses on the inner life of students, schools, and communities. In a sense, you've moved on somewhat from a focus on skills to a focus on deeper values. How did this evolution in your thinking come about and why is this now the focus of your work?**

I began to see that just teaching skills was not going to be enough. If young people are not connected to the unique meaning and purpose of each person's life, then even if we possess skills, we may or may not have the motivation or even the inspiration to use them. The second point is that I saw many young people who were exposed to the skills who were really doing more than being "good at conflict resolution." Going back to Gandhi's concept, they were actually "being the change you wish to see in this world." Or as Thich Nhat Hanh says, they were "*being* peace." They went beyond the skill to embody the skill. I was realizing that it's not so much about skill development, it's about working with our own character and about connecting up skills with our own inner lives.

**In order to bring the inner life forward in our educational process, we need to have some consensus on what happiness and fulfillment mean. Do you think we have that in our society?**

In my presentations, I do an activity where I ask, "If you could go to bed tonight and wake up in the morning with the power to teach one thing to all the children of the world, what would it be?" I've asked this question of thousands of people and—lo and behold—the responses are very similar. There is a strong consensus to make sure children feel they are loved, to tell them they have a purpose, that they learn tolerance and compassion, and that they feel a sense of interconnectedness.

Also, a particular study I talk about in *Schools with Spirit* is an international study with 200 global thinkers where five shared values emerged among all of them: compassion, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect. These values seem universal regardless of one's spiritual or religious perspective. I think we've learned from these and other studies and experiences in the character education movement that there's more consensus than we sometimes think.

**In the preface to *Schools with Spirit*, you express your desire to make schools "soulful places of learning where the spiritual dimension is welcomed." Some critics may dismiss such an approach as "touchy feely" and even threatening to academic success. How can you reassure those people who fear that a "soft" attitude in the classroom may short-change children in the long run?**

I think we need to educate the public in the strong scientific evidence we have that social and emotional competence leads to greater success in school and life. [See chapter by J.D. Hawkins in G. R. Adams et al, eds., *Enhancing Children's Wellness* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage) and H.J. Wallberg et al, eds., *Social and Emotional Learning and School Success* (New York: Teachers College Press)]. It isn't one or the other: academic success or schools as soulful places of learning. We also know that positive

relationships with peers and adults definitely lead to more constructive citizenship. We need to get to a place where we can socially and emotionally support a student's full growth and development. This is what schools can do and must do.

**Why do so many people think in terms of either/or?**

I've thought about that and I think it comes from many sources. I think we are still driven as a country by a materialistic world, a world we want to conquer. We don't live with a sense of interconnectedness that tells us "we're going to make it only if we all make it together." As a result, we've sold a lot of parents a myth about what we think young people are going to need to be successful.

**Who has sold that myth to parents?**

The myth occurs in the wider capitalist society that we live in so, in a way, we've sold it to ourselves. But I think we *do* have a window of opportunity in the wake of September 11th because people are asking the question: "What do you do when all else falls away?" And when you ask that question, the things I'm talking about here come up.

Look at what we did as a country after September 11th. We started to congregate and pray together and have vigils together because we were trying to become whole. We know we live in a world of competition and consumerism and yet we crave community and connection.

**Does the need to nurture the spiritual growth of students imply a need to nurture the spiritual growth of teachers?**

No question about it. One of the biggest challenges that we face right now is that most of us who find ourselves in the role of "teacher" have not experienced the kind of holistic education I'm advocating here that nurtures not only our minds, but our hearts and spirits as well. You can't

manifest something you haven't experienced yourself. So, one of the things we have to do is start to create learning experiences for teachers where they are in caring, learning communities themselves.

**I know you have overseen the piloting of RCCP in international settings (Brazil and Puerto Rico) and that you are going to be working with South American ministers of education on developing social and emotional learning programs. What do these international developments tell us about the direction of your work and your ever-evolving philosophy of education?**

What we hope to do by working with the ministers of education in various countries is to equip teams with the tools they need to successfully implement comprehensive programs with the vision we've been discussing in this interview. What I'm noticing is that educators around the world have expressed a need and an interest in better in-service and pre-service exposure to the area of social and emotional learning as well as the area I call "inner life skills."

However, to accomplish the shift in education that we're talking about, it's going to require leadership committed to creating a coherent vision and seeing it through. All this needs to happen at a time when there is a strong counter-demand for the short-term results represented by increased accountability measured by standardized testing.

The international dimension interests me because we are all realizing that as a global society we are becoming more and more interconnected. At the same time, what is happening in the U.S. with the narrowness of vision about education is actually happening throughout the world. Unfortunately, we've led the way with this narrow vision.

An international approach will give us better access to wiser solu-

tions. When we move out of a Eurocentric way of thinking and being, we begin to tap into many cultures of the world that have at their core some of the values we're talking about. I think it's our moral obligation to share what we know, and I also think it's our moral obligation to know that we don't have all the answers.

The other part of the answer to your question is that I feel an inner calling to do it.

**What do you think you will be called to do next?**

I feel that my work is more and more about helping educators remember why it is they decided to go into the field to begin with. The more we can

connect up who teachers are with what they know about good education, I think the braver and more courageous we can be around these issues. This is one reason I've recently expanded my work to become the director of the New York Satellite Office of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). I also think I'm going to be called on to do more "care for the caregiver," the caregivers being educators. In the months ahead I'll be doing renewal workshops for teachers and principals who are in the 11 schools in close proximity to Ground Zero. We need to give them time to stop and reflect. We need to nurture them as people who have to keep on serving.



## Women's Collaborative for Peace and Human Security

OVER 80 WOMEN LEADERS representing dozens of Boston-area organizations gathered at the BRC on President's Day, February 18, to "be inspired, participate, and get to work," in the words of Randall Forsberg, one of the key organizers of the day-long gathering. After several months of planning meetings and discussions aimed at defining the structure and agenda of the Collaborative, this mid-winter Women's Leadership Outreach Meeting served an important purpose in mobilizing women leaders for peace across a range of issues.

Among the key issues discussed were how to make women's voices for peace heard in the media, how to build a broad community, and how to achieve real security through global disarmament. The morning Plenary Session was introduced by Eleanor LeCain, board member of Women's Action for New Directions (WAND) and founder and CEO of New Way USA. Speakers included Diane Balser of the BU Women's Studies Program, Elise Boulding, Tess Browne of St. Anthony Cares, Barbara Hildt of WAND, Ivy Gabbert of the BRC, Randy Forsberg of the Institute for Defense and Disarmament Studies, and Wafaa' Salman of the Institute of Near Eastern and African Studies. Later in the day, participants worked in groups and workshops to build consensus and set a course for the future. For further information on the Collaborative and its evolving effort to empower and activate women for peace, please check out their Web page at [www.idds.org/wvindex.html](http://www.idds.org/wvindex.html).



Randall Forsberg reviews the day's agenda with participants.