

MIRANO, ITALY BELONGING PROJECT OBSERVATION, PART 1

By June Gorman

The following is as promised to my colleagues, Jytte and Peter McNair, and Lynnclaire Dennis (visionary/designer and force of the BeLonging Projects), as well as for my own records of potential models of Transformative Education (TEF-Global.org) for a sustainable world wherever and in whatever form and multiple models I can find that kind of education. Thus I'm enclosing my evaluation and assessment done over the 4 days spent in Mirano, Italy with BeLonging administrators, teachers, classrooms and most importantly, the children of those classrooms.

This evaluation/assessment is in two parts. Both are dominantly qualitative and completely subjective, based on my 30+ years teaching in diverse settings in the USA, and with students from over 120 different natural language/cultural backgrounds. Part I is a commentary of my experience, an expression of gut/visceral understandings, observations, responses, and reactions. Part II, an attachment, is a draft of a qualitative assessment "tool". It encompasses some key elements I believe are essential to transformative education and how to measure/assess them in a meaningful way.

PART I: CLASSROOM CLIMATE/LEARNING JOY:

As a credentialed teacher of primary and middle school in the US of over 30 years, and more importantly, a lover of learning in every form in my life for over 50 years, I have long thought about, analyzed and tried to put words to the critical context of joyful learning, born as essential into every human child. My personal tragedy was seeded in the strong knowing that the love of learning is absolutely critical to a loving, vibrant, healthy life and inter-dependent world and yet watched it, even from my own earliest observations, crushed and fatally wounded in so many. By far, the majority. Increasingly, I saw that joyful pleasure in the very fundamental role of teaching human loving and learning minds – designed to be happiest learning from others and their natural world together– wither and become corrosive and destructive in its, often unintended, damaging of that very kind of loving-learning.

This became increasingly true as I observed it, in the US after the people's and educational movements towards more freedom, creativity and "whole child" learning instituted there and in many modern parts of the world, in the 1960's and early 70's. After an initial fertile "flowering" of these movements and the educational models sprung up to reject strait-lacing conformity, the marketization of all creativity, and the control of society's systems by a wealthy industrial educated elite – who seemed to get more wealthy with increasing conflict and wars they promoted for their own profit – a counter reaction was definitely strategized and put in place by this very same elite group, some very sincerely focused explicitly on regaining control of society and education to save it from what they saw as a direct "*Attack On American Free Enterprise System*" (<http://law.wlu.edu/powellarchives/page.asp?pageid=1251>).

Much of what I observe come to pass in the years since as I started my own analysis of what was being changed in education and by whom when I began at UC Berkeley in 1976, has saddened and horrified me in its resulting damage to the love, joy and safety in every human classroom. I have spent my life and now my entire career, in search of those who saw and could formulate a different, more natural, more necessary path of human learning – focused on and directed by, in many cases, the children themselves.

Having seen many models of education in my career, and developed many of my own, my focus has been on what is most necessary to create emotional and social intelligence. From my perspective, this is key to developing a connected human problem-solver, children who grow into adulthood with the interdisciplinary skills necessary to create a truly viable and sustainable world. The BeLonging Project that I observed in Mirano, Italy is rare, a natural program that is innately infused with these premises and embodies this very kind of learning. To say that I “saw” these principles in action is insufficient. Like all truly healthy models of human connection and empathetic learning with joy, *it is more accurate to say that the whole truth is revealed through what one feels and experiences with all of our senses.* In the Mirano classrooms where the teachers were trained by Lynnclaire Dennis in how the model, based on the science of the Mereon Matrix, is applied to one’s person life, I was able to literally see and feel a living, breathing, joyful system of learning. It was a thriving vibrant system as contrasted with my more painful experiences observing more controlled and managed classrooms. Here, order is self-organized and organic as compared with children who are often forced into silence and speak mostly hesitantly, usually looking for either approval or permission. In BeLonging, the learners are able to do their task and confidently voice their own thoughts and ideas, as necessary input into the whole process. Having the ability to see energy move and feel when it is blocked, especially in learning environments, it was amazing to witness the technicoloured rainbow I perceived, as learning energy vibrated in the classrooms we visited (5 in total). The contrast between classrooms not using the BeLonging Project system and those where the kids were building a TeamPlay Ground was dramatic. The latter were noticeably duller, and far less vibrant.

The Belonging Project is indeed a “systems” model of a classroom that focuses on the most essential and often misunderstood components of any true human learning environment; it is a place where security and safety allow one to identify self and from there participate to create a truly connected context with others. My entire career has been centered on giving voice to this natural learning system which flies in the face of most ‘commonly accepted wisdom’. The key to learning *anything well in any context* is 1) having the inner sense of security to trust your own mind; 2) to freely own original and creative ideas; and 3) to trust you will be allowed and encouraged by others who are learning in concert with you. In these “standardized” times this is the rarest of classroom climates to find, as most are filled with stress-driven and stress-inducing fragmented subject matter tests, labels and quantitative measuring that ignores the human soul. It also contradicts what we are increasingly learning from neuroscience about how the human brain learns best: by allowing each individual their own unique internal “framing”

model). Simply put, *children learn best* if they are safe and free, taught in a diverse, loving environment that encourages “differences” and accepts, even celebrates all.

That is the contrast I saw in the Mirano classrooms! Teachers took the 3-5 day training course to learn how to transform their own lives from the inside out and this is what makes TeamPlay Ground work! This “game” of responsibilities, roles and related tasks, is relatively simple. It is based on the profound understanding that children deeply **want** to take responsibility for their own thoughts and actions, and to assist others who need them. What happens when they are given that responsibility is amazing. Again, this is in sharp contrast to most classroom management protocols that are essentially “classroom control” mechanisms instituted by teachers who are increasingly police-like. Too many teachers who were “called” to be educators have become miserable due to spending so much of their time and energy as babysitters or resolving conflict. TeamPlay Ground is a *natural* system that replaces this destructive ‘normal’! Learners self-organise in groupings that are directly related to natural systems. This is based on the functional architecture of the Mereon Matrix, and relates to how modern science and ancient wisdom traditions agree on a universally defined matrix of principles defined by natural forms.

The Link is the classroom ambassador;

The Substitute fills in for the teacher;

The Tree Kids learn to multitask;

The Sky Kids (air) reduce stress by lightening things up;

The Assistant (aether) sits beside the teacher all day;

The Dolphins (water) are in charge of well-being & conflict resolution;

The Earth Kids attend to the physical environment; and

Possibility (fire) Kids bring something to school.

All roles and every task are attached to sensual, natural phenomena. What is crucial and naturally brilliant is how every child rotates through these responsibilities throughout the school year. Although these permutations in the Mereon Matrix are very complex, this translation into a classroom management system is so natural that once one breaks through and “sees it” --and I saw that children grasp it far more quickly than the adults-- it flows like a water dance of controlled joy. Furthermore, these classrooms radiate with:

Calm; walking into a class I experienced a sense of peace that is gained only through trust and assurance that one is allowed safely to discover themselves with others;

Pride; this accompanies being trusted with an important and necessary role and accepting self-responsibly and caring for one another and doing it well;

Belonging is more than just the name of the project; it is the rich and deep sense felt when invited into their space; . This is deepened by the sense that the kids are absolutely able to take responsibility and do their role well;

Ownership; even when foreign and unknown visitors entered, the kids remained orderly. Clearly this the consequence of kids who know they are responsible, not managed by teachers who regiment and exert control. This calm, living and learning to easily adjust to eagerly welcome new input was remarkable. There was a sense of ‘breathing’ as kids who spoke a language different from me, took in the energy and formulated ideas around the new stimulus without confusion or chaos;

“Happy hands”; this is my term for the rare phenomena of all hands in the classroom going up to participate or to share in dialogue and activities. For the past 10-20 years, in my teaching experience (in the public school system of the United States) too many kids and their hands hid, running low or hiding in fear of being called upon in order not to be humiliated for “not getting it right”.

Gentle respect: this was for all the people in the room. I looked carefully for those shy and quiet children who are found in every class. These are the kids who are isolated, loners, marginalized or left out. They were present, but what was obvious was that they were comfortable and at ease in their quiet and still a part of the group! No one seemed to be quietly nursing pain, feeling alien, or unloved! In the BeLonging classrooms, as I searched for these kids, what met me was always a warm smile. Not once did I sense fear or see a child cringe or shy away from my attention or anyone else’s. These kids radiated self-assurance knowing that they could be themselves; that quiet or louder was simply part of authenticity of one’s innate desires. There was much more, but nothing trumped the feel of joy and pleasure. Simply put – all the children and teacher-adult(s) were **happy** to be there in that room! What they were doing together was learning infused with pleasure, a natural joy for all. The children were open, receptive, and mostly confident in speaking to and with us – foreigners, adults and intruders that we were. Almost equally amazing was the sense of time flowing easily! These classrooms had no sense of pressure, and neither the teachers or children seemed pressured. There was no sense of division as learning continued to flow around our visit, making it clear that they had transcended timed slots where learning ‘by the book’ is enforced. What was utterly absent was the stress that I often feel when a teacher is trying to control the class; there was no sense of needing to cram too much subject matter into too small of an opening. These kids overflowed with curiosity which for me was the most noticeable difference and in direct contrast to my experiences recently written in an article on the “feel” of the standardized public classroom, “Jackhammer Classroom: Torture and Rendition in Our Public Schools”.

Here, time in the classroom flowed naturally for everyone, children and adults. There was a mutual knowing that we were learning as we created pleasurable experiences in the time we shared. This is the way that learning most naturally happens. Coherent and filled with integrity, the Mereon TeamPlay Ground is in stark contrast to the increasingly fractured, fast-paced, machine-like learning that creates least, true learning and discovery. BeLonging classrooms support being truly human and operate at a meaningful pace! As a result learning happens without the emotional, mental or temporal stressors that damage children and burn out teachers.

The BeLonging Project is an integral system that fosters human learning by instilling coherency and creating a natural love of learning; it is a remedy for those ‘modern’ models that are in fact, learning disasters that fragment the human heart and mind; the Mereon TeamPlay Ground learning is what it was always meant to be for the most learning-dependent animal ever born onto the planet-- full of ease and joyful play.

It is time for us, adults, like the children, to remember this truth so we can naturally regain our joy and playful love of learning. This is what will allow us to innovate and

become solution oriented as we face today's myriad challenges. When we know that everyone belongs, to ourselves, to each other and our world, we and the students will begin to happily embrace 'natural' learning and thus joyful problem-solving together, once again.

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