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THE ENCOUNTER: A PATH TO EDUCATING IN BEAUTY AND WONDER FOR STUDENTS WITH ASD

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Abstract: *Our society operates at a frenetic pace, impeding our ability to perceive the world through the human capacity for wonder before beauty, placing more value on personal satisfaction than the truth. We must turn our gaze back to those aspects which guide our path in the world and allow us to discover truly the reality of things, with education being the point of departure. This capacity for wonder and beauty are a part of the essence of the human being and thus are independent of the abilities and disabilities of each individual because these particularities only serve to enrich us and make us unique. We can only engage with learning and perceive the world through our interrelation with others, through a culture of encounter. This encounter, when referring to persons with autism, demands more of the teacher than the child, given that it is they who must adapt to understand and accompany the child and valuing their particular manner of experiencing wonder and the beauty of the world.*

Keywords: *Encounter, Beauty, Wonder, Education, Autism.*

Introduction

When a human being is born they face an entirely new and unknown reality, filled with mysteries. Naturally, drawn by instinct, they throw themselves into the world, gradually exploring, little by little, step by step, anxious to discover, to penetrate and understand the unknown world around them. This begins with the senses, which are prepared for this new adventure, to pull back the veil of ignorance and revealing unknown and hidden realities.

But what drives human beings to explore this unknown reality? Individuals have within themselves a natural thirst for knowledge; forever seeking to understand the meaning and purpose of existence: the why and how of the things around them. Thomas Aquinas called this thirst for

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knowledge *Wonder*. And wonder, according to the ancient philosophers, is the source of all thought, the path which leads to the knowledge of the Truth.

In *The Symposium*, Plato affirms through Socrates that what makes life worth living is the contemplation of Beauty, stating: "He who loves beautiful things... loves good things... wants to possess them" (Hernández, 2006). If the human being seeks truth and goodness, the path towards finding them is Beauty. Plato locates Beauty in the world of ideas, as something eternal, immutable, perfect.

In our world today it seems we close our eyes to the very truth of things. If we stop and look around us, it seems we are slowly losing two properly human aspects, inherent to our nature. First, the capacity for wonder before beauty; that is, before what is true and good. Secondly, the capacity to throw ourselves into the unknown, to understand it as it really is. We see that human beings often seek satisfaction in things rather than seek the truth, which is truly satisfying. It is increasingly difficult to admire what is beautiful, the creation which is born anew every day; this means we become impermeable to the reality around us.

Certainly, we live in a society which shows a marked deterioration in its capacity for wonder before beauty and to truly perceive it, to enjoy life as it is and thus discover the beauty which surrounds us.

It is essential then to look with renewed optimism on our society and rededicate ourselves to cultivating the ground for the flourishing of the seeds of wonder and beauty found deep within every human being but are currently neglected. It is essential to work on these natural dimensions of every human being, requiring attention, orientation and the appropriate training.

Thus, wonder serves as the foundation of a worthy project for educating students today, discovering that wonder is only possible in the encounter with beauty; the aim is to highlight the importance of education in these two aspects which are essential to human nature and which together can become the wellspring of all motivation and action in children in the search for true knowledge of the world around them.

Hence the need to focus more attention on this essential aspect of human nature; offering alternatives to which provide the tools which will naturally lead to and develop these complementary dimensions which are the foundation of all true and meaningful learning.

The aim is therefore to strengthen these two aspects through a different vision. On one occasion, Lina María, a young person with learning disabilities approached Pope Francis and said: “Holiness: We want an intelligent world where we can celebrate each human being, all different, as a manifestation of life and diversity. We want a world in which vulnerability is recognised as essentially human and which, far from being a weakness, is a source of human strength and dignity; a place of common encounter which humanises us all. We want a compassionate world, which understands suffering and needs of others” (Bustamante, 2017).

This reflection highlights the importance of recovering the sense of wonder and beauty, from the perspective of all those with disabilities, especially that of children with autism. These children in particular have a unique capacity for surprise and wonder before what catches their attention and perceive as beautiful; they have a special ability to perceive and admire the beauty they see around them.

It is necessary to engage with these people, to rediscover their beauty, their unique perspective on reality and to create a space for them to develop their capacity for wonder and beauty from their unique perspective. This is a field which is worth exploring and educating and, above all, a field in which they have much to teach us.

Given the importance of furthering education based on wonder and beauty, we pose the following questions: *Do we believe it necessary in our world today to educate in wonder and beauty? Do we believe these are aspects that can be cultivated and taught in the world of learning therapy, especially among children with autism? Do we truly believe that children with autism can experience wonder, that we can experience with them this essentially human and co-natural capacity? Do we believe this is a field that has something to offer to the world today?*

The answer to these questions is Yes. And it can be seen that educational centres generally do not have a specific program for educating in wonder and beauty. There is little emphasis on this aspect within the field of Learning Therapy and it is necessary to emphasise the importance of rediscovering wonder and beauty, develop learning focussed on these aspects, particularly within the field of learning therapy.

Educate

Before speaking about education in wonder and beauty, it is necessary to explain what we understand as education and the act of educating itself

and thus lay the foundations of an experience which aims to instil, within the field of pedagogy, these two dimensions which are the essence of the human being.

Education is essentially an anthropological question, with the aim of encompassing and developing the whole person to their fullest capacity and in all of their dimensions: intellectual, affective, volitional, corporal and communal.

The etymology of the term “educate” has dual meanings. On one hand, *educere*, refers to the extraction or drawing out from within a person to achieve the fullest development. On the other, *educare*, related to nurturing and offering all the possibilities for a person to grow. Both of these notions place the teacher as the principal companion of the educational process, assisting the person in the process of becoming fully themselves. Thus, the goal of education is not to mould a person into what the teacher wants them to be but rather to help each individual achieve the maximum fulfilment of what they are called to be (Domínguez, 2012).

This view of education is far from being a structured technique to achieve any number of objectives or outcomes. The great thinkers on education have defined it as the path which leads the person to discover themselves, as unique and unrepeatable; or in the words of Pedro Poveda: “Every person has within themselves qualities which we educators can help flourish if we create the necessary conditions”.

But each plant has its own characteristics and, just as all across the world no two roses are alike, each having their own unique petals, so each person has their own unique qualities, and their own unique needs. To educate is to respond to these qualities and needs, through love. Nembrini (2013) affirms that education must take the person as they are, with their weaknesses, errors and problems... This should not be understood as a form of *do-goodism* but as the capacity for gratitude and dedication of all those who wish to dedicate themselves to education, regardless of the characteristics of their students.

Education and encounter

As we have affirmed before, the human being should be educated to become fully themselves, to reach their full potential. But we must recognise that the human being, in effect, cannot fully become themselves without the encounter with others. This encounter is understood as a

dimension of human nature, the social dimension; the encounter with others can be understood as something sacred (Barlow, 2005).

Education, therefore, cannot be understood as a set of knowledge that we accumulate but the capacity to develop the spirit through listening, developing thought and knowledge through contact with others. We are social beings who develop through engagement with others, and thus understand ourselves.

It is difficult to deny that the human being is constituted in relation to others. This would be to deny all personal and common experiences in society given that the social is an essential part of the human being, not an arbitrary construction laid over existence for convenience, utility or on a whim. As Ortega y Gasset said, the human being is “social in his most intimate texture”, a dimension which is neither accidental nor acquired (Agejas, 2013).

These interactions create meaning and permit intersubjective dialogue and must be taken as fundamental in the planning of teaching/learning methodologies. This is also the case when speaking of wonder and beauty.

Nembrini (2012) affirms there is no education unless accompanied by an adult. Education is not a series of sermons; not a preoccupation with what one should acquire. Education is never a question of the young, of children, of students or pupils. It is always a question of adults, given that education is the capacity of an adult to bear witness; everywhere bearing witness to the certainty and positivity observed by others.

All education should be based on the student gaining an understanding of the importance of engaging with life; helping them find meaning and truth in their existence in the world. The key to human fulfilment is an understanding that “that which has value remains forever”, inscribed in the heart of every human being aiding them on their path to fulfilment (Benedict XVI, 2010).

Thus, education is a process of encounters, never unidirectional; the student and educator are educative subjects. And we may ask: is there an educator who is not continuously embarked on a process of education? Everything depends on the attitude of the person in life.

The human need for interrelation is essential for our development, providing the social support necessary to adapt to our environment. Thus, the lack of the ability for interrelation can cause isolation and rejection, significantly limiting our quality of life.

Why educate in Wonder and Beauty?

Within the current educational context, we may ask ourselves if we provide an education with the aim of acquiring a host of concepts and skills which may be important in pursuing a specific profession; or whether we are educating in order for each individual, pursuing a path of knowledge, may discover themselves and so fulfil the role they are called to play in their life.

If the ultimate aim of education, as reflected in many of its aspects today, is merely the quantitative accumulation of a series of concepts, then education is not for everyone. Because not everyone has the necessary capacity to attain these particular goals; however, if education is seen as a path leading to the encounter with ourselves and others and thus with the truth of the world, it is here where it is worth speaking of the importance of educating in wonder and beauty.

Approaching education from this perspective we focus on the importance, not on the number of things which can and should be acquired, but in profundity on perhaps few things which must be lived and understood; because if life is about fulfilment, it is not better for those who know much but for those who value the fulfilment within their own lives. An education in these two dimensions, wonder and beauty, is one oriented towards valuing everyone. The cornerstone is the person, capable of wonder before beauty and therefore, with the need to experience it.

Today, it seems that the pace of life is overwhelming, we are accustomed to the fleeting, the immediate, to enjoy momentary pleasure, the superficial. We are losing the capacity to wait, to look beneath, to explore and know what lies beyond the merely visible; we want things immediately. We increasingly focus our attention on results when what is truly important is the process, allowing and respecting the time necessary for things to grow and mature.

In this historical moment, it seems we live not in wonder and amazement but bedazzled, passing from one moment to the next without stopping to reflect on what surrounds us, without apprehending the reality of things. We don't give ourselves time to ask: why?, what for?, we seem to flee from these questions, which are essential on the path of life. One cannot know what one does not really see.

The current need for immediacy is surprising. The farmer knows that if they want their crops to bear fruit they need time to grow; trying to pull at the shoots to make them grow faster will only prevent the plant from putting down roots and eventually kill the plant. The same is true of

children, each one growing, learning, discovering the world at their natural and different pace. Just as with plants, children need certain care to ensure this process of growth and maturing develops effectively, but this care must be appropriate to their needs.

If we allow our children to engage, explore and discover their world at their own pace, we see that, gradually, and with the necessary help from their environment, they will learn in a more vibrant and effective way, making their learning their life itself. Because life itself leads towards the encounter with themselves, towards the desire to attain their own perfection.

But today more than ever we are determined to see and know everything as quickly as possible. We seek, at all costs to foresee everything, without allowing for surprises. We try to know things before they occur, to foresee the situation and, often, to be free of all discomfort or frustration, forgetting that aspects of pain are also essential parts of life.

This haste in filling the young with knowledge does nothing but overstimulate them, cramming them with things, “because we want to be first” “to have the best”. With this form of overstimulation, we risk losing our awareness of the richness of childhood. We have robbed them of the joy of the adventure that is the gradual discovery of the world, savouring individual moments and learning from each of its circumstances.

This need to accelerate processes is nothing more than the drive for perfection, excellence which is pervasive in our society. According to the Italian writer Alessandro D’Avenia, we live in a time when it seems only the perfect has a right to live. Any defect, any weakness any fragility seems prohibited (D’Avenia, 2017).

If there is one thing on which we can all agree, it is that we are all fragile or vulnerable, but also beautiful, unique, unrepeatable; we all have abilities and disabilities. We all have defects and virtues. We all have something to learn from others, but above all, we all have something to offer, something to contribute, something to give, regardless of our limitations.

Educate in Wonder

Throughout history philosophers, pedagogues, poets, saints and psychologists have tried to describe and define the concept of wonder. Some regard it as a quality which others consider it a properly human capacity.

The ancient philosophers Plato, Aristotle and Socrates defined wonder as the wellspring of thought, of philosophy; even affirming that wonder leads to knowledge of the truth. On the other hand, Saint Thomas Aquinas uses the term wonder to explain the desire for knowledge.

Wonder can be associated, firstly, with surprise. This basic emotion can be defined as a physiological and psychological reaction of the individual before certain stimulus (an object, person, place or event). This is a natural reaction, innate in human beings; a feeling (Sanfeliciano, 2017). But wonder goes beyond this feeling or initial surprise.

The attempt to explain wonder as a single, quantitatively tangible thing may be impossible, but during the course of history there are those who seek to explore the mystery of things, the source of wonder. Most attempts to explain the notion of wonder encompass the idea that it is something co-natural in human beings, arising from the most profound source, and is implicit in every individual, leading to the knowledge of things and the discovery of the truth.

An overview of some of the authors who have celebrated wonder, considered it essential for individuals to live in plenitude and know and love the world around them, we will attempt to assess its value and the importance of educating in this aspect.

The human being naturally carries within them a thirst for the transcendental, always seeking to understand the reasons and meaning of existence, searching for the truth of things. According to L'Ecuyer (2012), we are stuck in a view of children as driven by their neurological organisation, leading us to focus on external stimuli as the key to determining who they are, in terms of their behaviour and their cognitive abilities; but children are more than this, with an intangible element; wonder is the first intangible manifestation of the human individual.

This capacity for wonder before things allows us to be more open and to continue exploring. Because beyond initial wonder arises the pressing questions that allow us to give and find meaning. Thus, we can say that this process of discovery can be divided into three stages: surprise, question and experiential response.

Thus, when we speak of wonder, we refer to not taking things for granted, to the ability to see beyond mere appearances, to understand deeper truths beyond the routine experiences of daily life. Wonder is not intentional but is the result of an openness to reality; an attitude that allows us to be surprised not by the exceptional but what we see as such,

occurring because by cultivating wonder we are able to perceive (Agejas, 2013).

Our knowledge of the world comes primarily from sight, but this must be a vision without prejudices and without preconceived notions. It is therefore important to open our eyes to the unappreciated beauty and ask: “what would have happened if I hadn’t seen it?” or “what if I knew I would never see it again?” (Carson, 2012).

Educate in Beauty

What differentiates the human from all other creatures is the capacity to perceive and to create beauty. Chesterton remarked that the human being is closest to God because humans are uniquely both creature and creator (Prada, 2018).

The human being naturally seeks the truth, harmony and beauty. We have been created to achieve fulfilment and this leads us to seek beauty, attracting us to everything which may be associated with ourselves and help in our self-discovery. This attraction towards the beautiful is nothing less than a special manner to find beauty within ourselves (Cencini, 2016). But beauty is not perceived by all people in the same way, but is something subjective, conditioned by the person perceiving it. The power of beauty is that it raises each individual to where they perceive their own reality. It is not standardised but rather idealised, centred on the perception of reality of each person, both in its intensity and in its meaning (Martínez, 2017). This capacity of beauty to transcend the soul of things makes us understand that we do not speak of beauty as something cosmetic but rather cosmic.

When speaking of beauty, one must consider a certain, or at least apparent, contradiction: the sensation of beauty is generally immediate and non-reflective; but the concept is rich and complex, as is the origin of this sensation which may be of varying types. Sensation, ultimately, is both simple and complex; it can be perceived by a child attracted for whatever reason, not always evident, to something which fascinates them, but only through contemplation can we recognise that which truly attracts us. Beauty is an experience rather than a concept, like an echo, representing something beyond human experience as an ulterior dimension; and, however, it is strictly linked to everyday experience, a happy echo or nostalgia of our own existence in the world (Cencini, 2016).

Only when beauty is experienced beyond the merely aesthetic can it be seen as a path to truth and thus, an essential element in cultivating the human being as every person see, almost insatiably, the truth within their surroundings.

For Plato, beauty is far from a merely aesthetic pleasure, affirming that “beauty is the splendour of truth”. It is the truth. What is true is also beautiful.

Wonder and Beauty in the context of autism

The DSM-V (2014) defines Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as a persistent deficit in communication and social interaction, as well as a lack of mental flexibility with stereotypical behaviour, interests and activities. There is broad variability across the spectrum and the diagnosed person may be influenced by other factors, which may be intellectual, communicative or behavioural (Aguirre, Álvarez, Angulo & Prieto, 2008).

When referring to children with autism, we are speaking of a very broad and heterogenous group with diverse characteristics, including their approach to learning. Given these circumstances, it is possible that not all children with these characteristics can perceive the subtleties of being educated in wonder and beauty from an academic perspective. However, this type of education can be approached in different ways, using more personal methodologies closer to their specific needs and which go beyond this concept.

Empathy is essential to the understanding of both the disorder and the perception of reality by children with autism, an aspect which can help create a special relationship (Szatmari, 2006). Understanding this special view of the world, with its own way of thinking, understanding, feeling or learning will help us to understand children’s often maladapted behaviour (Martín, Hernández & Ruíz, 2010).

Considering the characteristics of autism spectrum disorder, which may hinder the encounter with others due to limitations in social interaction or communication which is so important given the above, the question we can ask ourselves is: *Can we speak of educating in wonder and beauty in the context of autism?*

For this, we must consider that both beauty and wonder are part of the human condition, regardless of the particular characteristics and circumstances. We are all sensitive to the perception of what we consider beautiful and this perception arises from the emotion of wonder. Children

with autism also perceive the beauty of things and experience wonder. One need only observe the way in which they deal with what captures their attention. If something is beautiful, if something surprises them, they inspect it obsessively, they are passionate to the point they delve much deeper into things given that the characteristics of the disorder make them able to perceive details which we do not pause to consider.

This contemplation of details is what permits them to see things with greater authenticity. The only way to understand their way of seeing the world is by seeking encounter with them. That is, to offer those with autism the resources necessary to help them understand the world; and equally to approach their world, offering possibilities for knowledge, exploration and mutual discovery. Human beings continuously learn, regardless of their circumstances. Any type of learning is possible providing we focus on the essential; we educate through coherence, recognising the person, considering their whole being, their needs, capabilities and characteristics.

Fulfilment through personal growth can only be achieved through the encounter with others, drivers of growth through the exchange of experiences which help us achieve plenitude (Domínguez, 2002).

López Quintás (2009) identifies a series of conditions for encounter:

- *Generosity*: the mutual and enriching exchange between what we can offer and what other offer to us.
- *Openness of spirit*: our openness to others who are not like ourselves, who we do not know, running the risk of encountering the unexpected.
- *Truth*: showing who we are
- *Simplicity*: inspiring relationships based on equality, accepting our own limitations and the need to complete ourselves.
- *Mutual communication*: the intention to understand others, putting ourselves in their place to see things from their perspective and understand their behaviour: their desires, projects, tastes and reactions.
- *Fidelity*: the firmness of our assumed commitments.
- *Patience*: implying adapting to natura rhythms.
- *Cordiality*: the ability to behave well with others.
- *Shared important activities*: creating avenues for deeper connections.

If our goal is to use the encounter as an educational strategy for children with autism, based on the requirements outlined by Lopéz Quintás, we can admit that the characteristics of the disorder may obstruct this encounter. But it is here where we should focus on offering each individual the possibility to be themselves, with their own characteristics, peculiarities,

defects and virtues, abilities and disabilities. Only in this way can encounter take place.

In this opportunity for encounter, given the particularities associated with autism, we must be aware that this is only viable if the persons with autism are willing to receive that which the person offers them without anything in return and working to understand and accept certain behaviour which may often pose an obstacle to the relationship.

This encounter is possible, or can take place in a beneficial way, only with the participation of trained professionals to accompany the person, regardless of the specific characteristics of the individual. This is the specialist in Learning Therapy, who faces the challenge of providing the means for children with autism spectrum disorder can engage with reality for them to understand and accept our relationship within the encounter. These professionals play a fundamental role in the detection and attention to the needs of all children, thus becoming a bridge which provides children with what is necessary to discover the world of others.

The encounter thus becomes the ideal strategy for educating in parallel two worlds which may seem totally different. The encounter is above all a learning experience, creating those relationships where we become aware of who we are, allowing us to exist as individuals called to fulfilment and plenitude.

Conclusions

Given the above, we may conclude that education has a predominantly ethical aim, that is, the fulfilment of the individual person. Education is itself a form of communion, linking and enriching teachers and students, and all those in relation to others. If we believe education “refers to the person”, we must then affirm that education is the harmonious linking of all aspects and environments of a person.

We must take into account that education is one of the most important things in life, as it allows us to have a society based on principles, civilised, peaceful and just. It is therefore the logical and ideal instrument to transform our society (Savater, 2005).

If we consider education as an instrument to transform society, we must focus our efforts in educating from wonder and beauty. We need to protect the essence of the educational process against the haste which is an assault on the natural rhythm of things and persons. Children must live, grow and learn at their pace; and adults need to cultivate the child inside themselves.

Everyone must be able to tell their own story and this requires encounter, not based on efficiency, utility or the transmission of information but on mutual discovery, where each is loved for who they are, where all life is valued, seeking true beauty in the world around us; far from perfectionism, we seek goodness.

Our engagement with reality will be conditioned by our attitude, our way of being in the world and by our lack of prejudice. We may often be afraid, unsecure and uncertain when we are confronted by what is different, something outside the “parameters” of what we consider “normal”; in this situation we tend to flee, to escape and so lose the opportunity to learn. The true experience of learning is precisely in the encounter with what is different.

We have lost our capacity to apprehend beauty, often invisible to human eyes, rejecting what is different. We judge based on appearances, foregoing a deeper exploration of others to discover the world behind every face. In order for this hidden beauty to shine we must overcome the prejudices we have “adopted” as truth in our society.

Marcel Proust said: “Although nothing changes, if I change, everything changes”. This means that reality is what is presented to us, but we have the capacity to perceive it in a different way and so see new and different possibilities. We must foster this change, as this will change reality, revealing and dignifying the other by opening myself to those standing before me.

The manner in which children with autism see the world can change and transform the way in which we ourselves see the world, making it more a magical, wonderful and richly varied place. Once we appreciate their unique perspective, we can help them find their place in the world, with better results and perhaps achieve the goal of integrating them into our society while preserving and celebrating their special abilities.

"I don't think of all the misery, but of the beauty that still remains." (Frank, 1947)

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