EDUCATION TRENDS

The Best of 2012: My Favorite Books for Parents and Educators

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I hope that many of you took a peek at my blog about my favorite 2012 movies for educators and parents. Well here's phase two, my favorite 2012 books for teachers and parents.

The Sound of Hope

At the top of my list is Tricia Tunstall's *Changing Lives: Gustavo Dudamel, El Sistema, and the Transformative Power of Music*, the story of a revolutionary Venezuelan music program, El Sistema. A powerful reminder of how much programs in the arts can mean for our children, especially for our underprivileged students, it's a book that every educational and community leader should read. I wrote about it in a blog last March, but it's more than worth an end-of-the-year reprise and reminder.

Jose Abreu, who felt that music had the power to change the course of poor children's lives, started El Sistema with a handful of students in an abandoned garage, and went on to create a nationwide system that put musical instruments into the hands of hundreds of thousands of underprivileged kids. The lives of the children, their families and their communities were forever transformed. The most well known product of El Sistema is the exciting 31-year-old conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Gustavo Dudamel.

The program is now spreading across the United States, led by the national organization Sistema USA. El Sistema-inspired programs are underway in more than 60 locations in the U.S., including San Francisco, Oakland, San Rafael, Los Angeles, New York and Miami.

Of course our programs, unlike the Venezuelan one, receive little or no government support and are dependent on private funding. Not surprisingly, the U.S. programs have also had to demonstrate quantifiable success to funders, even though the key strengths of El Sistema -- the way it inspires kids, strengthens their characters and provides hope -- can't be quantified.

What all the programs share is a vision of mutually reinforcing musical and social goals. As Abreau noted, "If you put a violin in the hands of a needy child, that child won't pick up a gun."

Read the book. Take a look at the El Sistema website. Then think about starting one in your community and establishing parallel programs focused on art, the performing arts, or film and video.

Another Way

All About Reading: Web Sites for Book Lovers

Must-read Books for teachers.

Winter Reading: What's on Your Bedside Table?

Integrate the Arts, Deepen the Learning

Five-Minute Film Festival: National Day on Writing

David Thornburg on the Evolving Classroom (Big Thinkers Series)

Edutopia Blog Topics *See all Blogs*

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- Five-Minute Film Festival
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- New-Teacher Support
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- Social and Emotional Learning
- Student Engagement
- Teacher Leadership
- Technology Integration

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8. Professional Development
9. Curriculum
10. After-School Learning

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Unspeakable Tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School
by David Markus
Posted Dec. 14, 2012. 1:01 pm GMT

The Well-Behaved Teacher: Avoiding Santa's "Naughty" List
by Nicholas Provenzano
Posted Dec. 19, 2012. 10:44 am GMT

Using Technology to Reach Unreachable Students

Pasi Sahlberg is the leading authority on Finland's educational reform, and his book *Finnish Lessons*, released late last year, is my second selection.

The Finnish approach to education has some significant things to teach us. This is a system in which teaching is highly valued, teacher recruitment is highly competitive, and teacher education and continued faculty development are supported by the state. In Finland there is minimal testing, decent teacher salaries and high student achievement. Find me something here that isn't compelling!

As Sahlberg writes: "The Finnish way of educational change should be encouraging to those who have found the path of competition, choice, test-based accountability and performance-based pay to be a dead end." It should be noted that, for Finnish teachers, it isn't primarily about salaries; it's about status, authority, autonomy and respect.

The book and the Finnish system have gotten a lot of play in U.S. educational circles. There has also been the usual resistance to change on the part of some educators, whose refrain is often, "Yes, but . . . we're not like Finland, and it won't work here." Of course there are differences between our countries, and no one is arguing that we should adopt the Finnish system en toto. But I frankly get tired of "Yes, but . . . " responses. The question is what can we learn from Finland that we should adapt, and how can we make that happen?

Why is it that, when we have agreement among many of the best minds in education about a model that can help guide educational change here, so little happens? Why not capitalize now on the ideas coming from Finland? Every educational leader in every community should read the book, and use it as a prod to change. Perhaps this could start with a "summit" meeting that would include local district superintendents, teacher leaders and an educational expert or two. The task should be to come up with a visionary and realistic action plan for your community, utilizing what has been learned from Finland.

This plan may be a little grandiose, but it certainly beats both complacency and "hoping" for change.

Disappearing Childhood

My third choice is *Teach Your Children Well: Parenting For Authentic Success* by Madeline Levine, and although primarily written for parents, it's no less useful for teachers.

The book continues Levine's focus on adolescent problems that were explored in her first book, *The Price of Privilege*. A psychologist in Marin County, California who has worked with many unhappy, highly-stressed adolescents, she has focused on the roots of these problems. Levine notes that these kids have been programmed to pursue goals, with admission to a high-prestige college topping the list, that have created lives in which connection, contentment and pleasure have been lost. She writes:

> *They are anxious and depressed and often self-medicate with drugs or alcohol. Sleep is difficult and they walk around in a fog of exhaustion. Other kids simply fold their cards and refuse to play.*

She places the blame on both parents and schools. The parents care; that's not the problem. But they engage in hyper-parenting and have an unhealthy preoccupation with their children performing well to insure that they'll have secure and happy adult lives. In the process, they've lost touch with what really creates a happy life and neglected those aspects of family life that build contentment and enthusiasm.

by Ben Johnson
Posted Dec. 10, 2012. 9:29 am GMT

Common Core Big Idea Series 1: A New Blueprint
by Jay McTighe
Posted Dec. 4, 2012. 6:21 am GMT

Snapshot of a Deeper Learning Classroom: Aligning TED Talks to the Four Cs
by Heather Wolpert-G...
Posted Dec. 13, 2012. 1:17 pm GMT

Challenging the Model of 1:1 with BYOD
by Amanda Paquette
Posted Dec. 4, 2012. 11:49 am GMT

Working with Students Who Have a Hard Time Collaborating
by Robin Newton
Posted Dec. 18, 2012. 11:21 am GMT

Believing in Students: The Power to Make a Difference
by Dr. Richard Curwin
Posted Dec. 26, 2012. 6:50 am GMT

Digital Native vs Digital Citizen? Examining a Dangerous Stereotype
by Mary Beth Hertz
Posted Dec. 3, 2012. 9:21 am GMT

What Can School Teams Learn from Geese?
by Elena Aguilar
Posted Dec. 13, 2012. 6:38 am GMT

As for schools, Levine joins the growing list of educators and psychologists who are documenting the high cost of the present trends in schools: measuring kids by test performance, assigning heavy homework loads, and diminishing rather than increasing the focus on creativity.

This has to change. She notes that we are living in a world that is oblivious to the real needs of children and is actually damaging them.

Levine explores at length the idea of cultivating deep interests that engage kids in meaningful ways and engender excitement about learning. Her primary example brings us back full circle to El Sistema! Learning an instrument develops "islands of competence." Playing a musical instrument teaches deep concentration, the importance of practice, rule structures, feeling or empathy, and self-expression, along with encouraging individualized attention between the instructor and the student. She points out that these elements are missing in most schools.

Honorable Mention

I want to briefly call your attention to three other books that are certainly worth your time. Two of them have received so much justifiable attention that they may already be on your radar screens, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* by Paul Tough, and *Creating Innovators: The Making of Young People Who Will Change the World* by Tony Wagner. The third is a sleeper and is only tangentially related to education. *The Path to Hope*, by Stephane Hessel and Edgar Morin, is a follow-up to Hessel's *Indignez-Vous!*, a little book that was the number one best-seller in France a few years ago. Hessel and Morin, both in their 90s, are former French Resistance fighters who now call for a return to the humanist values of the Enlightenment. This includes giving adolescents a significant voice in change through civic action. It's a good little primer for educational activists.

Take a look at each of these books. But also add your own favorites to my list. And happy reading!