

We Don't Need No Education: Parents Are Doing It for Themselves

Julie Tilsen

ABSTRACT. Parent education has existed in some form in this country since the early nineteenth century and is considered a typical task of family therapy. Based on modernist notions of a universal construction of childhood and informed by the theories from which developmental psychology emerged, parent education has been critiqued as representing Euro-centric, middle-class values. This paper will provide a brief history of parent education and a postmodern critique of its origins and methods. An alternative narrative therapy practice that brings forward parents' insider knowledges is reviewed and presented in a case vignette of a session with the parents of a 10-year-old boy. doi:10.1300/J059v18n01_05 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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The teacher will emerge when the student is ready.

–Buddhist Aphorism

Julie Tilsen, MA, is a Licensed Psychologist in private practice in Minneapolis, MN. She is Adjunct Faculty Member in the MFT programs, Argosy University, Twin Cities, MN.

Address correspondence to: Julie Tilsen, 3005 James Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55408 (E-mail: julie@2stories.com).

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of parent education programs across a range of settings. In addition to those who hold the title of “parent educator,” parent training is conducted by family therapists, counselors, psychologists, social workers, and educators. As a family therapist, I am expected at times to provide services to my clients that would fall under the ambit of parent education or parent skills training. As a professor of family therapy, I am expected to train my students to provide similar services. This article presents a brief history of parent education, tracing its roots to developmental psychology and early childhood education, and offers a postmodern critique of its theoretical underpinnings and sociopolitical implications. A brief introduction to the organizing principles and basic tenets that comprise the postmodern practice known as narrative therapy is provided, followed by a case study of work with the parents of a 10-year-old boy in which ideas are employed. Finally, questions to guide the re-imagining of a postmodern parent education practice are posed as an invitation to therapists to commit to practices that avoid a reproduction of colonizing, essentialist notions of family and parenting.

PARENT EDUCATION’S FAMILY OF ORIGIN: A POSTMODERN CRITIQUE

Parent education is not a Johnny-come-lately product. In fact, Plato suggested that parents were not prepared to raise children and recommended that the State take over the education of children under age six (Osborn, 1991). Sherrets, Authier, and Tramontana (1980) report that parent education has existed in various forms since the early part of the nineteenth century in the United States, and Croake and Glover (1977) describe early iterations of parenting magazines published as far back as 1832. The first White House Conference on Child Welfare took place in 1909 and marked the beginning of governmental support and funding for such projects.

In Britain, major government-backed initiatives were in full swing by the 1970s (Smith, 1997). The United States followed a similar timeframe as Headstart originated Child and Family Resource Programs in which parents were provided, among a variety of social services and support, education on parenting (White, 1981).

Parent education is actually the offspring of early childhood education, which itself was born out of the theories articulated in developmental psychology (White, 1981; Smith, 1997; Cannella, 2002). Early childhood education is education for parents, as parents are taught the staples of child development and developmental psychology, behavior management, and parenting strategies. As with all grand narratives, the fundamental, guiding principles of developmental psychology rely on an allegiance to the scientific method and its quest for ultimate, knowable truths that can be universalized for all people. A quick glance at some of the parent education materials reveals both of these points. First, much attention is paid to child development. Specific markers of normal development are laid out in simplistic terms. Second, these markers are universally applied to children according to age group only. As is typical of practices informed by traditional accounts of developmental theories, these materials offer no consideration of the intersectionality of other contextual factors such as family structure, socioeconomic status, culture, sexuality, race, location (i.e., urban, rural, suburban), or nationality. Even gender is disregarded, as if girls' and boys' development are immune to the prescriptions of masculinity and femininity, and the social construction of gender norms. The message is clear: All kids should develop in the same way, at the same pace, regardless of the social location of their family or any other contextual factors. Children who do not meet normative developmental criteria may face being pathologized, medicalized, or considered to be "at risk." (For an examination of recent developmental theories that offer a more contextual framework, the reader is referred to Vygotsky.)

Because of these modernist, structuralist bloodlines, parent education has been critiqued as lacking any consideration for cultural context (Cannella, 2002). Atlanta-based therapist/activist Vanessa Jackson states that parent education is based on "Eurocentric, middle class, heteronormative notions of family, discipline, child development, and parenting" (V. Jackson, personal communication, June 16, 2005). In fact, some critics have asserted that there exists at least an implicit, if not explicit, element of social control in the very idea of parent education (Smith, 1997; Cannella, 2002), rendering it to be a bourgeois attempt to assimilate poor people and people of color into the hegemony of middle-class white notions of family. Smith argues that the challenge to proponents of parent education is not only to demonstrate the values of such programs, but also to "resist claims that they . . . (persuade) parents from disadvantaged groups into accepting their position and ensuring that their children learn merely to conform" (p. 115). Mothers, in particular, may

be prone to such subjugating effects. Croake and Glover (1977) state that “parent education is typically mother education” (p. 156), and Cannella (2002) applies a Foucaultian analysis of power and a Freirean sense of justice in her critique of the disciplining effects on mothers of early childhood education programs.

The disqualification of multiple realities and the invisibilizing of a diversity of lived experiences undergirds modernist applications of universal truths. Therefore, one of the unintended consequences of imposing a one-size-fits-all model—such as Piaget’s notions of child development—is a potential failure to connect and collaborate with families by legitimizing their unique experiences and recognizing the influence of their cultural context. An uncritical acceptance of and reliance on universal and essentialized knowledges ignores the fact that the discourses that support these knowledges inhabit particular sites of cultural power and influence, and exist as constructions that both reflect and perpetuate these sites.

For example, in clinical settings, therapy techniques that are often used in parent education reflect a modernist heritage, leading therapists to assume “a privileged, expert position with parents and children” (Schwartz, 2002). Family therapy strategies that may be employed in order to increase parental effectiveness include: teaching parents how to implement behavior management strategies; working with the couple’s relationship; family of origin work (particularly in regards to parents’ relationships with their parents); addressing “unresolved childhood conflicts that are impeding their sensitive parenting” (Meyers, 1998, p. 133); and modeling for the parents within the family session (Meyers, 1998; Brock & Bernard, 1999). While these are standard clinical practices, because the theories upon which clinical techniques are based are not “apolitical, acontextual, ahistorical, indisputable or benign” (Nylund & Tilsen, unpublished), the techniques derived from these theories are not politically pure either. Due diligence in the application of any educational or clinical technique requires consideration of the social location and other contextual factors that constitute clients’ lives. An uncritical acceptance of these practices potentiates the likelihood that the hegemony of Euro-centric modernist notions of family, parenting, and childhood will be reproduced in a colonizing fashion.

In educational settings, the oppressive effects of what Freire (1999) has called the “banking system” of education can be understood to be occurring in parent education programs that are premised on modernist notions. Nylund and Tilsen (unpublished) have summarized Freire’s description of this kind of education as follows: “Education is traditionally

framed as ‘an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor’ ” (p. 53). In this framework, the teacher lectures, and the students memorize, and repeat. Freire (p. 54) explains that banking education is generally characterized by the following oppressive attitudes and practices:

- The teacher teaches and the students are taught.
- The teacher knows everything and the students know nothing.
- The teacher thinks and the students are thought about.
- The teacher talks and the students listen–meekly.
- The teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined.
- The teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply.
- The teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher.
- The teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who are not consulted) adapt to it.
- The teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his own professional authority, which he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students.
- The teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects. (p. 6)

In contrast to the banking method, Freire advocates a dialogical approach to education. By abandoning the banking approach in favor of dialogue and open communication among students and teachers, teaching and learning become a two-way process. This stands in contrast to the anti-dialogical method which positions the teacher hierarchically above the students as the transmitter of knowledge, leading to the marginalization of students’ knowledge and experiences and the silencing of their voices.

As a revolutionary educator, Freire championed educational processes that were liberatory and that promoted “conscientization.” Conscientization refers to the development of critical awareness that positions the learner to take action on their own behalf, particularly against oppressive forces. An embrace of Freire’s pedagogical stance is a radical departure from the expert positions typically occupied by therapists and others providing parent education services.

***PUTTING THE CRITIQUE INTO ACTION:
POSTMODERN PRACTICES IN SUPPORT
OF PARENTS' INSIDER KNOWLEDGES***

Alternative practices that de-center therapists and theories and move clients and their insider knowledges from the margins to the center of the metaphorical page offer an option to the potentially colonizing effects of parent education strategies based on modernist premises that position the therapist as expert. These alternatives, based on postmodern and poststructuralist ideas, reject essentialized notions of identity and challenge the dominance of grand theories. This allows for a proliferation of possible identity conclusions and performances.

The ideas and practices that have come to be known as narrative therapy (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1996; Parry & Doan, 1994; White & Epston, 1990) provide an example of such a postmodern approach. Briefly, the concepts that constitute narrative approaches are premised on the notion that people organize their lives into stories, thus the use of the narrative or text metaphor. Identity conclusions and performances that are problematic for individuals or groups signify the dominance of a problem-saturated story. Problem-saturated stories gain their dominance at the expense of preferred, alternative stories that often are located in marginalized discourses. These marginalized knowledges and identity performances are disqualified or invisibilized by discourses that have gained hegemonic prominence through their acceptance as guiding cultural narratives. Examples of these subjugating narratives include capitalism, psychiatry/psychology, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and Euro-centricity. Furthermore, binaries such as healthy/unhealthy; normal/abnormal; and functional/dysfunctional ignore both the complexities of people's lived experiences as well as the personal and cultural meanings that may be ascribed to their experiences in context.

By conceptualizing a non-essentialized identity, narrative practices separate persons from qualities or attributes that are taken-for-granted essentialisms within modernist and structuralist paradigms. This process of externalization (White & Epston, 1990) allows people to consider their relationships with problems, thus the narrative motto: "The person is not the problem, the problem is the problem." The so-called strengths or positive attributes are also externalized, allowing people to engage in the construction and performance of preferred identities. Operationally, narrative involves a process of deconstruction and meaning-making achieved through questioning and collaboration with the clients.

While narrative work is typically located within the field of family therapy, many authors and practitioners report using these ideas and practices in community work (Dulwich Centre, 1997, 2000), schools (Winslade & Monk, 1999; Lewis & Chesire, 1998), and higher education (Nylund & Tilsen, unpublished). An example of a parent education practice based on these ideas follows.

Bruce and Christine, a 40-something European American, Catholic couple requested to meet me to discuss “parenting problems.” Their youngest child, Joe, was “running hot and cold” and they were finding that they were at odds with each other about what strategies were in Joe’s best interests. They stated they needed my help to “know what to do for Joe so we don’t keep disagreeing with each other about it.” For the record, I am not a parent.

Although they were seeking help because of difficulties with 10-year-old Joe, Bruce and Christine were reporting that Joe was experiencing some small and not-so-small successes of late. I was curious about the possible role either of them may have played in these successes. Bruce and Christine described how Joe set up a project that involved training a hamster. It required him to design and build a special hamster house. Bruce commented in passing that he helped Joe with the project. I was interested in Bruce’s participation with Joe on this assignment, particularly what it may reveal about Bruce’s own ideas and abilities to help Joe through difficult times in order to help stoke Bruce’s confidence in himself as a parent.

Julie: How come you offered help?

Bruce: The slip of paper from school said “parents can help”—I’m a parent!

Julie: Were you excited because you like science projects? Or were you worried he wouldn’t do well, or were you looking to connect with him?

Bruce: I wanted to get him going on it.

Julie: Were there any by-products of this “getting him going” that had to do with your connection with Joe that were meaningful to you?

Bruce: His design was neat. I don’t know if there was special bonding . . .

Julie: Did you tell him you thought his design was neat?

Bruce: Yeah . . .

Julie: What do you think that meant to Joe?

Bruce: Then he designed the door and that was good, too.

Julie: Do you think your appreciation inspired Joe to keep designing?

Bruce: (smiling) No . . .

Bruce readily expressed his admiration for Joe's design abilities but did not think that this fatherly endorsement had much bearing on Joe's efforts, despite evidence that his stated goal of "getting him going" seemed to have been met. I thought Bruce to be a bit modest about the impact his admiration had on Joe and asked if I could solicit another perspective. As a postmodern practice, narrative seeks to invite multiple perspectives into the conversation. This is done not as a way to talk someone into or out of something; rather, it is a practice which brings to bear multiple realities, affording people an opportunity to consider possibilities previously unavailable to them. Further, as a narrative therapist, I am committed to collaboration and to privileging insider knowledges instead of expert knowledges. Therefore, I sought Christine's perspective.

Julie: Christine, is he being modest? Does Bruce have a good read or a modest read on how his appreciation of Joe's work may inspire Joe?

Christine: He underestimates it.

Julie: He does . . . Do you think his appreciation means much to Joe?

Christine: (emphatic affirmative head nod) Big time!

Julie: From Joe's perspective, in what esteem does he hold his dad?

Christine: Pretty high . . . He doesn't want to disappoint him.

Julie: Would you say Joe sees Bruce as fairly gifted or skilled with these kinds of things—designing and building stuff?

Christine: Oh, yeah, he thought it was pretty cool . . . The process, not the end result—*part of the process was doing it with dad.*

From Christine's perspective, "doing it with dad" was quite important. Her comment highlighted for me the importance of a parent's relationship with their child and unveiled Christine's wisdom about her family. It was this kind of insider knowledge that I was interested in exposing in an effort to make it more readily available to Christine and Bruce. Bruce's insider knowledges were also revealed during this conversation. Without any training or consultation, Bruce had joined with Joe in an activity that, from an outside observer's (Christine's) perspective, illuminated the significance of their relationship. And, without any coaching or training from me, the story of Bruce's own ingenuity and success as a dad was brought forth. Rarely do I make attempts to teach parents about child development or suggest techniques for performing their jobs as parents. Rather than offering ideas founded on grand theories that have been realized in textbooks, not in people's lived experiences, I make a conscious effort to remove these "preconceived, expert ideas from the therapeutic conversation" in order to create space for clients' own ideas (Tilsen, Russell, & Michael, 2005, p. 41) by employing practices from narrative therapy.

When a child is having problems, has been psychiatrically diagnosed, and/or stands outside of the expected/accepted prescriptions of society, parents can be vulnerable to self-doubt, guilt, and shame as they are recruited into believing that they are not good moms or dads (Taffel, 1991; Freeman, Epston, & Lobovits, 1997; Nylund, 2000; Tilsen, Russell, & Michael, 2005). Proffering expert advice and delivering "truths" founded on pre-existing normative criteria may only serve to underscore or even perpetuate the very problems that are troubling peoples' lives (Weingarten, 1997). By assuming a stance of appreciation (Madsen, 1999) and curiosity (White & Epston, 1990), I am attempting to avoid this reproduction of problem-maintaining conditions.

The parenting team that came in reportedly at odds with each other was now engaged in a conversation of appreciation. Their knowledges and preferences as parents and as partners in parenting were being articulated in such a way that the enthusiasm in the room was becoming palpable. I continued to interview them about the recent events with Joe and the possibilities that they held.

Julie: So, you're saying that "big time," Bruce underestimates his influence . . . if Bruce were to begin to get a grasp of how important Joe holds him and what his appreciation of Joe's skills means to Joe, what would you anticipate would start to come from that in terms of their relationship and the impact on the family?

Christine: I think Joe would feel more secure about himself.

Julie: It's interesting you chose the word security because that's how we started (today's talk) by you saying, "there's been signs of Joe's increased security." Previous to the science fair, what were some of the things you may have been doing to help boost up his security?

Christine: He's doing it himself with the flute . . . We do get him to lessons every Saturday . . .

Julie: Some of the things that have increased his security you say he's been doing on his own . . .

Christine: We give him back-up . . .

Julie: Well, I was wondering about that! Without being too modest, what are you two doing in the background to support his ability to make the most of himself as a flutist? What would you want to carry forward from the time before the last two weeks got kinda crazy?

Bruce: We structure practice time and get him to lessons and make sure he has his flute when he has band.

Julie: So, you're getting him to his lessons, structuring practice time, reminding him to bring his instrument . . .

Bruce: Uh, huh . . .

Julie: Do those seem like reasonable things for you guys to be doing as parents? The kind of stuff you can do to support him?

Bruce: (Smiling) Yeah . . .

Julie: Yeah . . . what are you grinning about?

Bruce: (Still smiling) That's a stupid question! Those are parents' duties!

Julie: Yeah, I appreciate that—I'll tell you why I asked it—I'm recollecting a while ago when we had a meeting and you two were struggling to figure out how best to do those things for Joe. So now you tell me it's a stupid question and I'm like, yeah, that speaks to how far you guys have come.

Bruce: When dealing with Joe, yeah.

Christine: That's true!

As with many conscientious parents that I consult, Bruce and Christine were all too willing to credit Joe with any of their child's successes while taking the blame for any difficulties. Acts that fall into the categories of "parents' duties" and giving "back-up" are easily pushed to the margins and taken for granted. By drawing these out and placing them squarely in the center of their story of parenting, Bruce and Christine were able to re-experience these acts as valuable and in service of their mission as effective parents and partners in parenting. More importantly, they have both come to see that they are in a much more preferred place with their parenting than they had been, a place that the story driven by self-doubt and conflict had effectively obfuscated.

As we approached the end of our session, I commented that they could write their own parenting manual and have that available for future reference. I asked them to consider all that they had learned from their on-the-job-training and what would be worthy of documentation. I specifically organized my inquiry around ideas of working together as parents, given that was their initial concern.

Julie: If you guys were going to write the Cliff Notes on How You've Come to Agree About What to Do With Joe, what would be the table of contents? What would you highlight so you can reference it as something to help you when there's more disagreement than agreement about what to do with Joe?

Christine: That's kinda hard . . .

Julie: (Smiling) OK, I went from a stupid question to a hard question . . .

Bruce: Base it on Joe—is it healthy for him?

Christine: It's not black or white, recognize the gray area.

Bruce: It's not us, it's not how we were as kids. Is there a reward for him? Playing the flute is rewarding for him. Is it benefiting his self-esteem? He's not a hands-off kid.

Julie: Gosh, Bruce, you've got lots of ideas. You've learned a lot, haven't you? Bruce, when we first would talk, you'd speak with great frustration and sadness, like you were failing Joe somehow. Now, you're talking from a position of knowledge and strength, saying, "I know my kid."

Bruce: (Nodding) It's not frustrating anymore. His bad days aren't frustrating anymore.

Julie: Yeah, cool . . . What else have you learned in your collaboration of parenting Joe that you want to carry forward and remember when you're having disagreements?

Bruce: Is it good for the family? Big picture . . .

Christine: Firmness, expectations of chores, expect respectfulness, build on successes he's already had, have a unified front, take time for important things, keep routines up.

Bruce: Go to church, eat together as a family.

I was writing furiously to keep up with them, asking them to slow down a bit so that I could take it all down. They asked for the notes, their notes, the first draft of their self-published parenting manual, born out of their lived experience and field tested on their own kid.

BEYOND THE CONSULTING ROOM

What applications of narrative practices to parent education exist outside of family therapy? Narrative practices, as previously noted, have been employed across a variety of settings. Implementing these ideas in a parent education group presents many possibilities, limited only by the imagination of the facilitator and the membership. For example, group members may be given questions pre-written by the facilitators that allow them to share stories of parenting successes, help them consider things in new ways, or re-discover parenting skills and strategies that they may have lost sight of. Following are some sample questions:

- Think of a time when you felt most proud of your parenting. What was going on? What were you doing, who was providing support and encouragement, what things were happening that allowed you to shine as a parent?
- What is your mission as a parent? Describe how you see your job as a parent and what you do to meet its requirements.
- What advice would you give to new parents? How did you learn that?
- From your (partner's/friend's/sibling's, etc.) perspective, what would s/he say they most admire about you as a parent?

Questions such as these help leverage clients' knowledges and abilities by bringing them to the center of discussion. When done in a group, conversations become particularly generative as participants' ideas and experiences feed and grow off each other, bringing to life the notion of socially constructed identities.

Ultimately, it is how the facilitator conceptualizes his/her relationship with the participants that matters most in the execution of narrative-informed ideas. By privileging clients' knowledges and ideas over so-called professional or expert knowledges, facilitators position themselves in collaboration with clients. As Madsen (1999) asserts, it is more about attitude than technique. This, however, may be the most challenging and the most radical dimension of embracing a postmodern parent education practice.

REPORT CARD

I hold in my hand a one-page, two-sided handout I picked up at a large community-based family service agency in town. It is titled *The Family Report Card* (Alliance for Children & Families, 2000). It asks, "How does your family rate?" and has nine areas where families are to grade themselves on a scale from 0 to 10. Grades range from "low score, but you can improve it. See if our agency can help" to "Outstanding! Keep up the good work!" As I consider the nine categories (communication, encouragement, commitment, morals and values, community involvement, appreciation, adaptability, clear roles, togetherness), I reflect back to the meeting with Bruce and Christine.

I wonder which categories, if any, they would consider essential to family life? Where would they find common ground with this report card and where would they differ? If they had been asked to score themselves using the pre-existing, essentialized, normative criteria reflected in this document, what effect would their score have on them? What dimensions of their lives and identities, possible hopes, intentions, and values may go unexplored, even invisibilized by this finite list of nine categories?

Finally, as I think about our work together, I find myself feeling grateful and indebted to Bruce and Christine for being such great teachers to me, and for helping me continue to resist the seduction of universal truths, certainty, and delusions of expertness. I hope I can continue to make the grade.

Making the grade during this era of so-called evidence-based practices (EBPs) and empirically validated treatments (EVTs) raises several concerns for professionals committed to collaborative, inclusive, and socially just practice. These manual-based protocols take the evaluation of the effectiveness of our work out of the hands of the clients and back under the authority of experts. While a thorough explication and critique of EBPs and EVT is beyond the scope of this article (the reader is referred to Duncan, 2002; Miller, Duncan, & Hubble, 2004; Raw, 1998; Webb, 2001; Scheyett, 2006 for further examination of these issues), given the current climate, it is important to advocate for outcome-informed practices that measure the effectiveness of clinical efforts based on client feedback (Duncan & Miller, 2000; Duncan & Sparks, 2003).

Narrative practices rely on client feedback to inform the direction and content of the conversations. As such, evaluation is constant and ongoing as the therapist/facilitator solicits client input and critique of the process, thus providing *practice-based evidence*. More formally, as an ethnographically based form of inquiry, narrative presents many possibilities for qualitative evaluation of parent education programs. By privileging clients' ideas of what will constitute change, progress, or improvement, practitioners and researchers can partner with clients to hold themselves accountable to providing effective services.

EDUCATIONAL REFORM: LESSON PLANNING FOR THE POSTMODERN FAMILY

What can we learn from this investigation into the history and roots of parent education? How can the teachable moments that emerged with Bruce and Christine inform the efforts of family therapists and other parent educators dedicated to serving families and supporting parents? In the spirit of respectful collaboration and in anticipation of the possibilities that curious inquiry can lead to, I offer the following questions as possible guidelines for re-imagining a postmodern, postcolonial parent education practice:

- What do we need in order to develop and support our own shift in perspective from teacher to learner?
- How can we engage with parents in ways that put us in collaboration with them?

- Who should we consult with in order to avoid a reproduction of expert-driven curriculum and processes?
- Might we need to reconsider the very term “parent education?” What other possible language would capture the spirit and intent of this re-imagining project?
- In what ways might we invite the voices of children and youth into the process of parent education? How can we do this in a genuine way, not tokenizing their participation?
- What other areas of study and experience might we draw from in order to inform our work?
- How can we think past the idea of “mom and dad” in order to include families and communities from a diversity of cultural locations who may have untapped knowledges and experience in child rearing?
- What processes of accountability must we put in place to assure that white middle-class values and beliefs are not driving the content and process of working with parents, particularly those from other cultural backgrounds? Who is best positioned in our society to advise on this?
- What other questions are important to consider in order to create an inclusive, respectful process of re-conceptualizing parent education? (Remember: there are no dumb questions!)

Only by asking critical questions of ourselves can we begin to have accountable practices. Only by asking questions of those whose knowledges have been absent from the conversation and whose perspectives have been pushed to the margins will there be a true exchange of information, a fundamental and necessary aspect of all learning.

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