

APRENDICES | T2: E1 Melina Furman

Desgrabación - Traducción al Inglés

Link: [Aprendices | T2: E1 | Melina Furman](#)

INTRO

When you enter a school you know if people are having a good or a bad time.

And I feel like teachers are far from recovering the joy of feeling we are creating and enjoying ourselves.

There is a need to recover that sacred spark, so when I try to make that happen, or when it happens to me, I know that yes, this is the good road, I'm going the right way.

PREVIA

Tell me more. I said yes because it's you, but tell me a bit more about it.

Look up.

We started thinking that we need more than an academic chat to face the day-to-day classroom. We also need life experiences to show us how abilities are developed...

Something more human, to revive the vocation a bit, right?

We connect a bit with that.

Do I leave everything here?

Yes, leave everything here.

Come with me, Melina.

Very good.

Over here.

The set... Beautiful.

Alright, here we are.

We know this girl.

Before the makeover. A full makeover.

Hi. How are you? I know these two,

There is no script, there are no predefined questions, except for one which guides the conversation and is the starting point, and that is: How do you define yourself?

And here you have the chance to say other things, to show other facets.

Let's see if we can make other Melina Furmans.

Let's play.

You're far away.

Melina, take three, final clapperboard.

CHARLA

I have a hard time with that question, especially every time I have to fill it out in a questionnaire. For example, today at the hotel I was asked my profession. I never know what to say, I write different things.

Professionally, I define myself, broadly, as an educator. And to me an educator implies a lot of things. There's a bit of the researcher in it, of wanting to understand what things work best, how to get students to learn, how to get teachers to enjoy learning and to teach in an increasingly potent way...

It's also about trying to understand and making an impact, of asking yourself how to do it, not just to accompany someone else but when you're on your own, how to get those little students' eyes on the other side of the desk to sparkle. So, professionally, I'd call myself an educator with everything that goes with it.

In the last few years, my other great definition is being a mother. I have twins who are now nine years old and they set off a new part of my being, which is enormous and I had no idea it existed, so I also write it down inside that little box.

What things were left alongside the way, or diminished, or didn't grow and were overtaken by other things?

Many were integrated, but I didn't study education at first. I studied biology with the idea of being a scientist, of being in the lab mixing up tubes. And that's what I did in the last years of my career.

The good thing about a lot of science careers is that many professors stimulate you to get your hands dirty, to go to the lab, to try. I worked at four different labs.

And it started happening to me because I was super sure of being a scientist, and I actually enjoyed the career a lot. I started studying biology, I was between medicine and biology; I wanted to find the cure to some common disease.

I remember that in the vocational interview, the college vocational guide said "Well, and you..." I managed to resignify it years after the interview. And she told me "Well, what do you want to do?" I want to heal millions of people, I want to do something that makes an impact and improves the life of people, and that's why I'd study the sciences. As for medicine, I figured that was more one-on-one and not as useful. And she said: "And what I'm doing with you right now isn't of use to you?"

And that thing that is so important from an educational perspective, is what you sow in those in front of you. So I wanted to understand how the brain worked and I started studying biology with that in focus. As a matter of fact, I worked in neuroscience for a few years, a lot of laboratory, with mice, seeing what happened when they learned things, if they forgot them, and which proteins changed inside their brains. We'd take their brains out, it was all very science-y.

And I realized that I was doing what I wanted, what I supposed I wanted, and I didn't like it at all. I got bored a lot. And at that moment, when I was about 25, I thought "What am I doing here?" I had the scholarship and the research group I wanted, and it was full of wonderful people and we had a good time, but there was something inside that didn't click and I started thinking maybe there just isn't something that really fulfills you, you know?

So I started trying other things on the side. I met a friend, a kind of brother, named Gabriel Gellón, who is also a biologist, ten years older than I am. He had already deconstructed himself as a scientist, and he told me to go teach science workshops for kids, as he did.

We got together with people who were designing a museum on evolution and we got to writing. We started trying out things he'd already been working on. He told me to come on board. We began creating a science website for kids, which was my first great project when I decided to march ahead with it. It was called "Experimenting", and it was about learning by doing things. Many years later, we did a TV show for kids called "The House

of Science", and the motto that started every chapter was: "There's only one way to find out. How? By doing it".

Well, knowing him and other people made me get a taste of something where I felt wonderful. It's like that moment when the weight is gone and you say "I'm good here, this is it, creativity flows, I feel this is my place in the world". With a lot left to learn, of course.

What happened in that first workshop that you were invited to, and you decided to go ahead with a workshop for children?

I remember one of the things we did was fake goo, or slime like they call it now. It's something you mix and it becomes a paste, but we were interested in how to make the perfect goo, and we had to define what "perfect" meant, whether it meant to stretch it a lot without breaking it, and how we would go about measuring it.

It was a bunch of things, a lot of silliness, but highly stimulating when it came to thinking with the children. It was a primary school to which we'd go to every week. And I remember the instance of thinking alongside the kids and going "Wow, this is good, something's going on here". I had and still have the conviction that scientific thinking, in the rigorous, curious sense, helps us become better citizens, better people. It has a positive effect on us.

It becomes a sort of bigger purpose. It's good to plant that in people who will not dedicate themselves to science afterwards. That's where I felt that this was worth it, that I liked it and I had fun with it.

In your book you're fairly categorical and you borrow a phrase that says that we are Third World because we lack scientific thinking. On some level, we accept truths without knowing the evidence underneath. You're categorical. Something about that drives you to making science accessible.

It's a phrase by an Argentine doctor who has lived for decades in Mexico. His name is Marcelino Cerejido and he has a book called "Why Don't We Have Science?" And he says that in Latin America having scientists is like having an orchestra. It's nice to have them, it feels good, countries feel civilized for having them, but no one really uses those scientists in the sense of connecting them to production, to the industry.

That underwent a change, but we're still a long way off. And there's also the matter about our society looking at science as something extraterrestrial, as a revealed truth, and not as something that you build through questioning and trying to understand.

So yes, this is something that stays with me. In the last few years I strayed away from scientific education and involved myself in a broader education that teaches how to think. I don't care if the subject is history, language, literature. It's about developing our own thinking, of enjoying the learning process.

I wouldn't call it a second u-turn, it was rather like drifting away to another perspective. I left the love of science, of biology, for education in general.

Did you find a purpose in this new way of teaching and learning development? Is there a purpose there, something that connects with you and what you do today?

There is something more there. I've been working with schools for 20 years now and when you enter a school you know if people are having a good or a bad time. You breathe in the classroom.

And I feel like teachers are far from recovering the joy of feeling we are creating and enjoying ourselves, with exceptions. But there is a great number of professionals of education, of teachers, who for any number of reasons, working conditions and so on, have a need to recover that sacred spark.

So when I try to make that happen, or when it happens to me, I know that yes, this is the good road, I'm going the right way.

I remember now that in your personal trajectory, in your first big projects, you travelled all through Argentina. How many Argentinas did you find travelling to those schools?

Plenty. Several, at least three or four distinct ones. There's Northern Argentina, the more forgotten Argentina. And I'm not just talking about Argentina. I travelled through Latin America a lot these years, and, no matter the countries, there are forgotten peoples with zero possibilities, where the expectations for children's education is very low, so the things they do teach don't make much sense, nor are they easy things. You realize how their potential withers away, and it breaks your heart.

And there's also a more privileged world, which exists in all our countries as well. Those people have a much higher scale of possibilities, and they're just a block away from the others. Sometimes they are really that close, separated only by one neighborhood, and it's like night and day.

A project we did really hit me hard with that. It was a project for a preschool called Inspiring Practices at a Beginner's Level. So we made two sequences about science

called The Sound Detectives and The Mysteries of Light and Shadow. It was for kids of 4 and 5 years old and their teachers.

We showed the same didactic sequence in a very privileged Argentine school and in a very poor school, only four blocks away from each other. We had the idea that good teaching would be successful in any scenario. And that was what we saw. But even though you know and read about this stuff, it was hard to actually see it for ourselves. Children at four years old, the cultural capital, the way of talking, the ability to wait for your turn, everything that a school is supposed to teach beyond just content, school and home; the possibility of speaking your mind, of articulating your thoughts, of waiting, of being listened to, of overcoming failure when there's something you couldn't do. It was such a stark difference between the groups.

Though I knew it in theory, seeing that was like a revelation to me. It made me realize those first years truly are extremely important.

I couldn't help linking that to your most recent work, where you open yourself up a bit more, and start looking beyond the classroom to the community, the families, the way they help their students.

I couldn't help thinking about those areas you went to which have been socially, economically and educationally ignored. And the expectations are low and we respond to that, right? If little is expected of me, I'm only going to go so far. But many times there are also low expectations towards teachers.

That happens too, sure.

Society has low expectations about what we do. Does that drive you to raise or, rather, broaden your outlook?

Yes, I agree completely. When I was doing the doctorate, I came across an author by chance who hit me hard and became central to my doctorate thesis. I did the thesis in the United States. I was working in Bronx and Harlem schools, the ignored schools of the States. But different, with other kinds of needs and racial challenges. If you looked at the buildings, it seemed like Switzerland; they were beautiful. But I remember going to a class on urban education where they would talk about schools in extreme poverty and I would raise my hand and say these schools didn't look so poor. But there actually were conflicts and difficulties, as there are everywhere else.

So my thesis was on how to prepare those who studied to become teachers in those schools without lowering expectations, and wanting to teach interesting things. And I came across an author by the name of Martin Haberman who put a name to that. He talked about the pedagogy of poverty, which is just that, when you throw in the towel.

The pedagogy of low expectations, of not expecting much. Sometimes for good reason, due to difficult experiences. But that is the moment where you are no longer challenged by what you do, where there's little interest.

And like you say, that is something that society sometimes places on teachers. That thing of not hoping for too much or of assuming they won't work much or know much or that they don't want to study.

I always get asked this question when I talk about working with primary schools. They ask: "Do teachers want to do all that? Don't they stand up and go on strike?" And the truth is, no they don't. An isolated teacher may be less eager to work on something new, but in general, when the projects are worth it, my many experiences in preschools, primary schools, high schools confirm the same thing: teachers go for it, enthusiastically.

As long as they are properly prepared and are not left to their own devices. If I just go and tell them "Everything you do is wrong, change it, do something differently tomorrow, take this recipe" and leave, obviously, it won't work. That's disrespectful and it has no connection to reality.

For that to change you have to be there, you have to be involved, to discuss things, to be present in the classroom, to look at the folders and see what happened. It's all a kneading process, you know? Of learning together.

Personally, I never got the urge to work at the higher echelons of educational policy, I never felt that calling. I don't know if it's my thing. I don't think so. But I do believe change begins from the inside of the school bottom-to-top. And this is shown by a great deal of research that suggests school is a learning community.

When there's an executive team committed to getting together and thinking together, it's not about anyone having the truth, but the opposite. They are schools that think and work and really process what they are doing. Many parts of the world that managed a more systemic reform took that path.

You say there are schools that think about themselves, but you travelled through countries and a continent drawing inspiration from them. And I keep thinking about this need to know different realities for inspiration. A person is not a bank of activities, and one reads your work and there are many inspiring examples, not to copy, but which offer inspiration as a teacher.

Is there a need to incorporate the knowledge of other experiences, not as a teacher in the classroom, but as a traveller of other schools?

Totally. I am a bit of a travelling ambassador. It would be great if we were all travelling and being inspired, searching. I go looking for little pearls, things that can't be missed, and I try to share them. Examples are important to me. I think they are underestimated. We have this fear of replicating them or worrying what others will say about them.

On the contrary, I'd tell you it's a good thing. You always do your own thing afterwards. But sometimes we suffer from an ode to creativity, the sense that we have start from scratch, from zero, and it's not helpful. I think what helps us is trying things out, more lightly, to me at least.

Sometimes I feel education values the great theoretical ideas, but in the same way society overlooks teachers, we tend to feel theoretical ideas are very powerful, and that classroom examples are small things and easily done, but this is a lie. It truly is a lie.

Good activities are hard to do, so when you find them you have to share them. I hope people copy them and then do their own versions of it. It's never a direct copy anyway, but I think one must give more weight, value and love to practice. It really is a lot of invested time, and people thinking them through.

I feel like there's a role there, a sort of purpose. If I can contribute something, and my books deal with this, it's trying to be the bridge between doing what must be done and the defeatist attitude of feeling everything is wrong. And the how; I always think about how, how, how do I do this. It obsesses me.