Edna, Epicurus, and Education

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Although she seemed to have everything, Edna's great dissatisfaction in Chopin's novel, *The Awakening* (1899/1981), led to suicide. Epicurus might have been able to help her. Epicurus believed that people are motivated by pleasure, but distinguished between lasting and fleeting pleasures; people ought to prefer the lasting pleasures. Epicureans sought tranquility through detachment from the things Edna's society valued. Understanding atomic physics would provide the knowledge needed to obtain both freedom from mental disturbances and freedom from bodily pain. Epicurus' advice – to live simply in accordance with nature – still holds. Why not be eclectic in philosophy of education? Although he does not have all the answers, Epicurus has some ideas useful for educators.

Bien qu'elle semblait tout avoir, la grande insatisfaction d'Edna dans le roman de Chopin *The awakening* (1899/1981) l'a conduite au suicide. Epicure eût peut-être été capable de l'aider. Epicure pensait que les gens étaient motivés par le plaisir, mais faisait la distinction entre ceux qui sont durables et ceux qui sont éphémères; les gens devraient préférer les plaisirs durables. Les épicuriens recherchaient la tranquilité à travers le détachement des choses que la société à laquelle appartenait Edna valorisait. Connaître la physique atomique fournirait la connaissance nécessaire pour obtenir à la fois la liberté face aux dérangements mentaux et celle face à la douleur corporelle. Le conseil d'Epicure, vivre simplement en accord avec la nature, tient toujours. Pourquoi ne pas être éclectique en philosophie de l'éducation? Bien qu'il n'ait pas toutes les réponses, Epicure a quelques idées utiles pour les éducateurs.

Edna's Lack, or, Why Education Needs Epicurus

Readers of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899/1981) sometimes complain that they don't understand what's wrong with Edna. She has everything: money, status, family, financial security, a beautiful house, and servants. She has beauty, health, talent, and the opportunity to follow her own predilections. She has friends, even lovers, whom she could cultivate without upsetting her household, if she did it discretely. It seems that Edna should be satisfied; it is hard to understand dissatisfaction so deep that it leads to her suicide.

Edna rejects her position, her financial security, and her role as wife; she cannot give up her ineffable longing for something more. She cancels her afternoon receptions, held to impress upper middle class Creole society. She plays with her children, but only when she feels like it. She refuses to shop with Leonce for new furnishings. The only thing that interests her is her art. But Edna doesn't become an artist, even though she has her friend, Mademoiselle Reisz, the pianist, as a role model. Although she admires and envies Madame Ratignolle, she sees childbirth as a "scene of torture" (Chopin, 1899/1981, p. 146). She allows herself to fall in love with Robert, seeking fulfillment in an idealized romance that cannot be realized. But she knows Robert will leave, and then it will be someone else, and after that, someone else. Love cannot save her either. Neither can sex, which she tries as well, having a fling with Alcee Aorbin.

Perhaps her art could have saved Edna, had she realized the difference between pleasures that escalate and those that satisfy. But Edna's education, her whole mode of existence, did not cultivate this idea of satisfaction that lasts. She expected to be fulfilled by social standing, wealth, reputation, and personal beauty, but she wasn't. She longed for something that she did not have, but she did not know what it was. Seeing no way to reconcile the difference between what she longed for and the life she lived, Edna committed suicide. Epicurus would have understood both what Edna longed for and why Edna committed suicide. She chose pleasures that do not endure when she needed lasting pleasure; Epicurus knew the difference. He called fleeting pleasures *kinetic*; enduring pleasure *katastematic*. *Kinetic* is familiar in English, but the unfamiliar *katastematic* means

pertaining to a state or condition, therefore stable. The Epicureans also permitted suicide when a life of pleasure, properly construed, was no longer possible; however, this does not fit Edna's case, even though apparently she thought so.

Often, contemporary education does not do a good job cultivating *katastematic* pleasure. The goal of Epicurean education was tranquility of body and mind – the absence of physical pain and mental disturbance. Epicureans thought this was easy to obtain. In general, the Epicurean sought to ignore whatever was outside of his or her control, cultivating simplicity to maintain control over what was within his or her power. Wealth, reputation, even health (when disease is adventitious) lie outside our power. Things happen to us that we have no power to avert. Within our power are the actions that people choose: friends, the food they eat, the material possessions they acquire, the things they do. If people keep these simple, according to nature, they remain unperturbed in mind and body. Epicureans postulated that people are motivated by pleasure. Unfortunately, some things that appear to be pleasures bring pain in their wake. Eating meat has an adverse effect on health, drinking alcohol entails a hangover, drug use escalates, creating side effects or withdrawal symptoms, sex may result in unwanted pregnancy or disease. If we base our success on the stock market, over which we have no control, we are at the mercy of economic forces. If we depend on our reputation, false accusations may arise. If we must be fashionable, we have to keep up with the trends. Epicurus would counsel us keep our pleasures simple.

Much contemporary culture, and therefore contemporary education, favors *kinetic* pleasure. Winning at sports, working for grades or other extrinsic rewards, being popular, being fashionable, and holding a high-paying job just for the sake of buying things afford *kinetic* pleasure. The advertising images on TV that bombard children reinforce the idea that *kinetic* pleasure is the goal of life. According to Epicurus, lasting pleasure results from people being in control of their actions so that what they do and desire conforms to nature. Eating simple, healthful food, exercising, learning skills that are useful to the community, acquiring knowledge that can make life better for the group do not entail unpleasant aftereffects. Edna's trouble is that she can

only envision *kinetic* pleasure. She glimpses the lasting pleasure, the pleasure of accomplishment, that her art might bring, but she fails to reconcile that with the goals her society has impressed upon her. I fear that many children, too, have an unhealthy dose of *kinetic* pleasure and lack a sense of enduring pleasure.

Educators agree with many of Epicurus' ideas. Children are motivated by pleasure. If they like what their teachers ask them to do, they will do it again. His ideas are surprisingly contemporary, addressing such problems as choosing good pleasures over bad, avoiding being ruled by ignorance and superstition, obeying the conventional rules to avoid getting into trouble, and remaining unperturbed by troubles outside our control. Modern connotations of the words *epicurean* and *epicure* mislead us too about the philosophy of Epicurus. His advice – to live simply in accordance with nature – rings true in an era when the increasing complexity of our society damages the quality of life in many ways.

Although I do not agree with everything Epicurus recommends, nor do I think he solves all educational problems, I examine how his philosophy might help us gain insight into how education could encourage *katastematic* pleasure in the second section of this paper. In the third section, I examine the implications of Epicurean philosophy for education before returning to Edna in the fourth. I conclude by recommending that we be eclectic in our philosophy of education, adopting what we find useful in Epicurus.

The Theoretical Basis of Epicureanism

Often misinterpreted as a hedonist, Epicurus defined pleasure (*hedone*) as tranquility. He had no doubt that humans seek pleasure; the phenomena certainly confirm this, but for him, pleasure consists of having your atoms in conformity with nature. Pleasure consists of freedom from mental disturbance (*ataraxia*) and freedom from physical pain (*aponia*). Being in control, or self-sufficiency, contributes to both. Epicurus excludes accidents of fate from his conception of happiness: wealth, health, fame, and the like, because they are not under human control. He recommends detachment from such things,

desiring the pleasures of invulnerability, as Philip Mitsis (1988) puts it. Knowledge and virtue are instrumental in achieving pleasure, rather than goals of intrinsic worth. Philosophy is therapy.

> Empty is that philosopher's argument by which no human suffering is therapeutically treated. For just as there is no medical art that does not cast out the sicknesses of the body, so too there is no use in philosophy, unless it casts out the suffering of the soul. (Epicurus, cited in Nussbaum, 1994, p.13)

Among techniques students learned at the Garden were repetition and practice, veneration of the master and the master's words, confession of transgressions, and living simply in accordance with nature in a community of friends. A set of four simple exhortations, affectionately called "the four-part cure" by Epicureans, could suffice to attain tranquility. These were (a) Don't fear God, (b) Don't worry about death, (c) What is good is easy to get, and (d) What is terrible is easy to endure. Epicurus' explanations were simple.

> 1. If they exist, the gods, being perfect, have no interest in human life or any need for our sacrifices. They merely provide a good example of how to be happy.
> 2. Death is just the dissolution of the present configuration of atoms, themselves indissoluble. After death there is no sensation, so there will be no pain.
> 3. Simple pleasures are easy to get, if you live simply, and,
> 4. Since pain will end in either recovery or death, pain is easy to endure. (Inwood and Gerson, 1994)

These teachings function like medicine, which heals the sick, but does not have to be understood by them. The Epicurean teacher uses them to cure the sick souls of wrong desires. Friends play a large role by supporting each other. Members of the Garden's community shared their material resources; they lived simply, in harmony with nature.

For the more sophisticated student, Epicurus believed that understanding physics would produce the same result; if humans understood the physics of thunderstorms, they would cease to fear vengeful gods. Epicurus is a materialist determinist, following the atomism of Democritus and Leukippos. In *De Rerum*

Natura, the oldest complete Epicurean text, Lucretius reveals the basic tenets of atomism. Unseen, atoms are the indivisible, indestructible unit of all things, which exist in a limitless space, and travel in uniform motion until a primal "swerve" causes them to form new configurations. The qualities we perceive result from differing configurations of atoms, which are themselves invisible, fastened together in "packed phalanxes" (Lucretius, 1951). Knowledge of physics creates peace of mind, as Epicurus tells Pythocles:

> If we were not troubled by our suspicions of the phenomena of the sky and about death, fearing that it concerns us, and also by our failure to grasp the limits of pains and desires, we should have no need of natural science. [Natural science is *physiologia* rather that *episteme* here.] A man cannot dispel his fear about the most important matters if he does not know what is the nature of the universe but suspects the truth of some mythical story. So that without natural science it is not possible to attain our pleasures unalloyed. (Epicurus, cited in Bailey, 1926, p. 97)

If Pythocles can memorize "these brief sayings ... [which] afford a sufficient outline for our understanding of the nature of existing things," (p. 25) he'll have sufficient background to make decisions conductive to the good life.

Sensation is, like everything else, the result of atomic motions; consequently, a materialistic account requires that thoughts be objects. Atoms constantly stream off the outer surfaces of objects. Retaining their shape only for a time, they float about in the air as images (*eidola*). If someone receives the image before it loses its shape, he or she will get a true picture of the object. However, people may imagine things like centaurs exist because the images of real objects intermingle after the atoms have floated around for a while. Epicurus thinks myths are caused by such confusing *eidola*, which give rise to frightening superstitions. Besides sensations of objects, a person can also perceive inner sensations (*pathe*, or feelings), caused by the motions of internal atoms. When people explain their sensations by a theory (*prolepsis*) that accords with the atomic hypothesis, they attain a calm state of mind concerning the phenomena, as Epicurus explains in the *Letter to Herodotus*:

> We must keep all our investigation in accord with our sensations, and in particular with the immediate apprehensions whether of the mind or of any one of the instruments of judgment [the senses] and likewise in accordance with the feelings (*pathe*) existing in us, in order that we may have indications whereby we may judge both the problem of sense-perception and the unseen. (Epicurus, cited in Bailey, 1926, p. 21)

Although many possible explanations of phenomena are consistent with it, Epicurus accepts the atomic hypothesis itself a *priori*. For instance, "thunder may be produced by the rushing about of the wind in the hollows of the clouds ... or by the reverberation of fire ... or by the rending and tearing of clouds" (p. 69). Should more than one possibility make atomistic sense, the explanation could not be confirmed, although Epicurus thinks that generally only one explanation will work. The right one will be known by "immediate apprehension" (p. 21).

Epicureans made a two-fold distinction among pleasures. Pleasure is the satisfaction of desire, and some desires are "natural, others vain, and of the natural, some are necessary and others merely natural, and of the necessary some are necessary for happiness, others for the repose of the body, and others for life" (Epicurus, cited in Bailey, 1926, p. 87). The vain desires are certainly to be avoided; they cause a craving for more, as do addictions, or entail greater pains than the pleasure they supply, as does a hangover. By natural desires, Epicurus means satisfaction of hunger and thirst. Plain "bread and water produce the highest satisfaction, when one who needs them puts them to his lips" (p. 89). Although he is not opposed to luxuries, they can cause pain if they create atomic disorder.

Knowing "the limits of pleasure" makes us appreciate luxuries when we happen to get them (Epicurus, cited in Bailey, 1926, p. 89). Epicurus believes that the various pleasures are essentially equal in quality, which he affirms when he declares that "if every pleasure could be intensified so that it lasted and influenced the whole organism or the most essential parts of our nature, pleasures would never differ from one another" (p. 97). Since they don't last equally well, the important distinction is between *kinetic* and *katastematic* pleasures. A *kinetic* pleasure consists in the satisfaction of a desire, for instance, drinking

when you are thirsty. Such pleasure are transitory. *Katastematic* pleasure consists of having all our desires satisfied, a state that can last. Rousseau agrees, advising a tutor to instill desires that are possible for a child to achieve (Rousseau, 1979, p. 80) . Obviously we should chose the latter. A *kinetic* pleasure which leaves us soon unfilled is not worthy of choice. On the other hand, when the mind "having attained a reasoned understanding of the ultimate good of the flesh and its limits and having dissipated the fears concerning the time to come [fear of death]" (Epicurus, cited in Bailey, 1926, p. 99) arrives at tranquility (*ataraxia)* we are in a state of *katastematic* pleasure.

Limiting one's pleasures to those that are necessary will avoid harmful addictions: "Of desires, all that do not lead to a sense of pain, if they are not satisfied, are not necessary, but involve a craving which is easily dispelled, when the object is hard to procure or they seem likely to produce harm" (Epicurus, cited in Bailey, 1926, p. 101). Likewise, pleasures that are both natural and necessary will suffice to keep us in a state of *katastematic* pleasure, with occasional *kinetic* pleasures thrown in for good measure. Epicurus did not eschew these little luxuries, like the cheese he requested from a donor, "that when I like, I may have a feast" (p. 101). He also says that "frugality too has a limit" (p. 131).

Although it might seem that Epicurus is contradicting himself when he says, on the one hand, that all pleasure is the same, and, on the other hand, that we must choose wisely between pleasures, he is not. Pleasure is the same qua pleasure, but various modes of obtaining and keeping it may differ in their results. We use intelligence to choose the most efficacious way to seek and maintain a state of continual, *katastematic* pleasure. For Epicurus, the only criterion of judging the merit of any act is pleasure.

> For we recognize [undifferentiated] pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good ... when we maintain that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of profligates ... but [those that result from] sober reasoning, searching out motives for all

> choice and avoidance. (Epicurus, cited in Bailey, 1926, pp. 89-91)

Justice for Epicurus, and indeed, virtue in general, is also instrumental to pleasure. "The justice which arises from nature is a pledge of mutual advantage ... it is never anything in itself, but in the dealings of men with one another ... it is a kind of compact not to harm or be harmed" (Epicurus, cited in Bailey, 1926, p. 103). Furthermore, there is no absolute standard of justice, but the content of the contract changes when the circumstances change (p. 105). There is no reason to suppose that the law will be the same in different countries or at different times. The problem with behaving unjustly, for Epicurus, is that "it is not possible for one who acts in secret contravention of the terms of the compact ... to be confident that he will escape detection, even if at present he escapes a thousand times" (p. 103). According to Lucretius, society coheres because of a contract whose aim is mutual benefit. People don't break the law because "it is not easy for one who breaks by his acts the mutual compact of social peace ... for even if he escapes notice ... he must lack confidence that it will stay hidden forever" (Lucretius, 1951, pp. 199-206). People are just because justice is instrumental to tranquility.

For Epicurus, pleasure is not at odds with nobility; indeed, some of life's greatest pleasures are provided by friendship. "Of all the things which wisdom acquires to produce the blessedness of the complete life, far the greatest is the possession of friendship" (Epicurus, cited in Bailey, 1926, p. 101) for which "we must even run risks" (p. 111). The community of friends was one of the therapeutic devices of Epicureanism. Friends supported each other in their endeavors to attain the pleasures that prudence (*sophrosune*) dictates.

> Of all this the beginning and the greatest good is prudence. Wherefore prudence is a more precious thing even than philosophy: for from prudence are sprung all the other virtues, and it teaches us that it is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently and honorably and justly, (not, again, to live a life of prudence, honor and justice) without living pleasantly. For the virtues are bound up with the pleasant life, and the pleasant life is inseparable from them. (p. 91)

Friendship is a source of pleasure, but the friendship must be durable and the pleasure, *katastematic*. Epicurus states that the "same conviction which has given us confidence that there is nothing terrible that lasts forever or even for long, has also seen the protection of friendship most fully completed in the limited evils of this life" (p. 101).

Epicurus' purpose for philosophizing was to cure for sick souls. "Vain is the word of a philosopher which does not heal the suffering of man" (Epicurus, cited in Bailey, 1926, p. 133). "We must not pretend to study philosophy, but study it in reality: for it is not the appearance of health we need, but real health" (p. 115). As Martha Nussbaum (1994) points out, this is an old analogy: as medicine is to the body, philosophy is to the soul. Pain of the body we can ignore, through philosophy, if we have healthy souls. We blend our philosophy with daily living: "We must laugh and philosophize at the same time and do our household duties and employ our other faculties, and never cease proclaiming the sayings of true philosophy" (Epicurus, cited in Bailey, 1926, p. 113). Like coaches, Epicureans exhort their followers to live well by keeping the atomic principles in mind. Healthy food, healthy thoughts, a healthy body, and a healthy soul result.

The Implications of Epicureanism for Education

Epicurean philosophy has implications for education. Although I do not agree with all of them, I do with many; some are found in current educational theory and practice. Repeating the four-part cure, practicing *katastematic* pleasure, and venerating the master were the main components of an Epicurean pedagogy. Disciples need only memorize the maxims of the *Kuriai Doxai*, but the master, at least, must understand the principles of atomism from which the maxims spring. Perception provides the means for confirming hypotheses (*prolepses*) for those capable of understanding the theory of atomism. Since all learning follows the same model for Epicurus, a view which Behaviorists share, the study of philosophy is beneficial at any age, perhaps the earlier the better, since children memorize things easily. An Epicurean education was accessible to more people than education at the Academy and the Lyceum, including women and

slaves. This is quite different from Plato's reservation of dialectics for people over 50 and Aristotle's idea that ethics was not a fit subject for the young.

Epicurean epistemology, much like Locke's naive realism, would recommend hands-on experience and manipulatives. With care paid to the clarity and immediacy of images, people could avoid drawing mistaken conclusions. Images can be seen equally well by child or adult. Dewey also remarks on the importance of images in *My Pedagogic Creed* (Dewey, cited in Archambault, 1964, p. 436). Problems arise though misinterpretation, however. Epicurus thinks we can check the match between the *prolepsis* and the atomic hypothesis by immediate apprehension. Epicureans would not regard the senses as deceiving. Much like scientific method, when the theory makes sense out of the phenomena, the hypothesis is confirmed.

Since society helps people maximize pleasure through cooperation, education is social. Self-esteem must be high among Epicureans; younger Epicureans venerate the master to learn to venerate themselves later. Where philosophy is therapy, exhortation is the appropriate vehicle. Pleasures are to be judged on their permanence, which can accord with judgments based on their nobility, but only coincidentally. In the Epicurean account, the antique virtues of friendship, frugality, simplicity, and moderation accord with the primary goal of education: tranquility of mind and body.

Edna and Epicurus

How would Epicurus have helped Edna feel satisfied with her life? First, he would have advised her to live simply, in accordance with nature. Edna needs *katastematic* pleasure. If she pursued her art, as does Mademoiselle Reisz, or took care of her family, as does her friend Madame Ratignolle, or liked simple things like gardening, which she tries, she might have been satisfied with her life. However, she seeks fleeting pleasures, which she finds superficial and annoying after a time. What would Epicurus have said to Edna?

First, Epicurus would have approved her decision to move; she seeks simplicity and self-sufficiency in the pigeon house. However, he would have counseled her to leave hedonistice

pleasures behind. Her farewell dinner shows that it would have been possible. She does not take pleasure in the sumptuous trappings of the event. Unfortunately, she brings remnants of her hedonistic past with her, as shown when she succumbs to Alcee who accompanies her home afterwards. Second, she tries to work on her painting, which would have afforded her lasting pleasure, but she doesn't have the discipline to pursue painting seriously, perhaps because immediate gratification is lacking, perhaps because her society does not approve of art as an occupation for a woman, a censure that Chopin herself felt. However, art is a much better pursuit for Edna than flirting and going to the races to win money. Third, she longs for a sexual relationship with Robert, who declines. Epicurus thinks friendship provides better support for people seeking tranquility than sexual love. Edna likes the company of friends, but she cultivates the wrong people. Epicurus would have preferred Mademoiselle Reisz. Edna could have been a good Epicurean, but she needed more support. Epicurus would have advised her to come live in the Garden, away from temptation. The little restaurant she discovers, "like a garden ... too modest to attract the attention of people of fashion" (Chopin, 1899/1981, pp. 138-139) represents that possibility, but it is not enough to save her, even though she likes it.

Learning to swim, which Edna is doing at the beginning of the novel when her relationship with Robert is still in the Platonic stage, symbolizes living in accordance with nature. At the end of the novel, Edna stands naked on the beach. She swims out to sea literally stripped of her clothing and metaphorically stripped of her pretensions. She seems strangely happy, although totally vulnerable. She hears sounds from her childhood; then nature pervades her consciousness: "there was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air" (Chopin, 1899/1981, p. 153). But Edna cannot survive in nature, even though she has been learning to swim throughout the summer. The life she leaves is artificial, far from the simplicity she sought in her move to the pigeon house. Chopin's foreshadowing of Edna's suicide seems almost Epicurean in its language:

> But the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly

> disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult!
>
> The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in the abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation.
>
> The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (p. 17)

Edna perishes because she can't understand the tumult. She needed an Epicurean education in how to live simply, to seek *katastematic* pleasure, to find companionship in the society of friends, and to avoid mental and physical disturbance. An Epicurean therapist might have been able to cure her sick soul, had she been disciplined enough to follow his advice.

Can We Be Eclectic in Philosophy of Education?

The question my students often ask after surveying various philosophies of education is, "Which is right?" The 20th century has become eclectic in many fields of endeavor. People find this unsettling, wanting the security of one right answer. Since our philosophy of education influences our practice, it is imperative to understand the implications of the views we hold. We need not accept everything a philosophy puts forth, but may find parts of it useful. Richard Mckeon spoke to his classes on this point.

> Is there a cumulative process in philosophy? I'm doubtful whether, in the strict sense, there is a cumulative process even in the sciences. Still, in philosophy there could be a cumulative process, though not in the sense of process to a single philosophy. In general, I think it can be shown that ideological agreement on one philosophy is neither possible nor, if it were possible, desirable. It would put us into a kind of intellectual sleep in which we need do no further thinking; and consequently, there will not be, I hope, a cumulative process toward the discovery and establishment of one single philosophy. On the other hand, I would be quite willing to argue that this does not yield a relativism. If there is one truth – and this seems to be highly probable – this does not entail the consequence that there is only one way of expressing the one truth. The situation that men are engaged in, both in their

> theories and their practices, is infinitely rich ... therefore ... the cumulative process in philosophy that would seem to me to be desirable is one in which the circumstances are set up for a continuing pluralism. (Owen and McKeon, 1994, p. 8)

Since the positions of antiquity are often analogous to modern views, we gain insight from them. Epicurus has useful reminders. Since children are motivated by pleasure, they need to be able to tell the difference between good pleasures and bad pleasures. Epicurus' distinction between *kinetic* and *katastematic* pleasures strikes me as both sound and useful. Children follow our teachings, maybe not by "venerating" us, but certainly being influenced by us, so it is important to model good behavior. Contemporary educators believe that developing students' self-esteem is important for their success, as did Epicurus. Overcoming the fear generated by ignorance is essential to this venture. Working in groups helps as well. The development of civil behavior in a society of mutual benefit is certainly desirable. The civility whose lack we lament may well be advanced by conventional behavior motivated by a desire to stay out of trouble. Finally, although Epicurus may not have all the answers, his philosophy asserts that everyone can learn, although some may take longer, a conclusion contemporary educators share.

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