

## The Educator's Shadow: Beyond the Artificial Happy Ending

By Maryam Naddaf

Education is not meant to be easy, passive, or filled with artificial happy endings. It is an **ethical act**. It is meant to awaken emotion, to cultivate spaces for complex and uncomfortable reflections, and to call for difficult decisions that activate real, raw compassion. Education is a **political act**, one that requires action that is not ignorant of the realities we are surrounded by, but action that responds to the very real—and sometimes cruel—world we humans have created.

In this way, education is an **act of justice**, one that in playful but honest ways reminds us of our privileges. Education, therefore, is an **act of love**—not in its romanticized form, but in its complex, entangled truth where black and white, right and wrong, good and bad are not meant to be defined independently. It is an act that pours an incredible amount of emotion through our body and soul to remind us we are meant to be part of this world we have separated ourselves from for so long.

### The "Safety" of the Sanitized Classroom

This deep commitment to truth-telling finds its scholarly roots in what Megan Boler (1999) defines as a **Pedagogy of Discomfort**. This framework invites us to move beyond our "comfort zones" to interrogate the cherished beliefs and cultural values that sustain social inequities. Yet, in many modern learning spaces, we often do the opposite, prioritizing a "Safety Audit" that favors compliance over justice. We sanitize the curriculum, removing the "ache" of the real world to keep children comfortable.

When we choose this path of sanitization, we reinforce what Paulo Freire (1970) described as the **"banking model"** of education, where students are treated as passive containers for information rather than active participants in their own liberation. We inadvertently create a "Separation Wound," teaching children that they are spectators of life rather than participants within it.

Consider a group of school-age children who spent months playing "War." Their ritual was consistent: they would build elaborate block villages only to systematically bomb them into rubble. For the educators—three of whom had survived war firsthand in their home countries—watching this was a daily, visceral weight.

### The Pivot: From Observation to Ethical Action

As the educators met for their weekly reflections, they reached a collective realization: observation was no longer enough. They held an ethical responsibility to act. For them, the growing unease wasn't rooted in a shallow fear of "violent play" or a moralistic judgment

that "war is bad." Instead, it was a deeper calling to address the sanitized detachment they witnessed in the children's play. They reflected on the children's laughter amidst the "destruction." They realized the children felt no real emotion when their villages were leveled because, for them, war was a sanitized abstraction—a privilege afforded to those who have only ever seen war as a distant news segment followed by a cheerful commercial.

They knew that the traditional tools of authority—banning the game or lecturing the group on the "evils of war"—would change nothing. Such actions would only force the children to hide their truths rather than transform them. To provoke a genuine ethical awakening, the educators needed to move beyond the role of the spectator. They needed to understand the children's truth to know where to meet them, entering the mess alongside them as co-witnesses to a more complex reality. They decided on a **playful response**, choosing the most organic way to invite trust and enter a child's world: by becoming one with them.

### **The Intervention: The Long Path to Trust**

One educator, who had a personal experience with war, began the long process of entering the play. He didn't rush. He sat on the floor, day after day, building his own villages, attacking, and being attacked in return. He played the game exactly as the children had designed it.

He knew that to influence the play, he first had to be accepted as a **true playmate**, not an adult with an agenda. He needed to understand the mechanics of their world—the rules of their "war"—before he could introduce a new truth. After several sessions, once he had earned their total trust, he made one subtle, "entangled" change: **he brought in people**. He carefully placed small figures in his homes, telling the children, *"This is my family. These are my neighbors."*

The game continued. Planes flew, and the educator's village was flattened. As the children enthusiastically rushed in to inspect the "damage," the educator didn't rebuild. He sat amidst the ruins and quietly said:

**"My buildings are ruined. My people are dead. My family is gone."**

A heavy, absolute silence took over the room. In that moment of reflection and regret, the "spectacle" ended. The children were suddenly confronted with the raw reality that war hurts living beings. No lecture was needed; the realization was felt in their own bodies.

### **The Transformation: The Slow Awakening**

Contrary to the "artificial happy endings" we often crave as adults, the change in the children was not sudden. Instead, the educators bore witness to a slow, subtle evolution—

one that could have easily been missed without a deep commitment to pedagogical documentation as a tool for democratic reflection.

Small shifts began to ripple through the studio. One child continued to build tanks but refused to engage in the violence. Arguments broke out about the unfairness of war; children began to protest that they didn't want their creations blown up. Some children declared themselves "Switzerland," choosing a space of peace amidst the chaos.

This transformation was only possible because the educators responded to the "conditions of our times" (Moss, 2014). They recognized that the nursery is a political place where children must grapple with the polycrisis of our era. By refusing to hide behind the privilege of neutrality, the educators allowed the children to move from a sanitized "spectacle" of war to a collaborative process of survival. They proved that when we treat the nursery as a site of democratic experimentation, we allow a more just "new" to be born.

### **The Daily Offering: A Practice of Presence**

To live this manifesto is to commit to a daily, rhythmic return to the "mess." Rather than a checklist of successes, we offer this reflective practice to hold at the end of each day—a way to bridge the gap between the classroom and the world. This practice honors the BC Early Learning Framework (2019), which encourages educators to see themselves as researchers and co-constructors of knowledge alongside children.

The Three-Breath Reflection:

1. The Breath of Truth: *Where today did I encounter the 'cruel world' in my classroom? Did I turn my face away toward a happy ending, or did I have the courage to sit in the ruins?*
2. The Breath of Entanglement: *Who did I struggle to love today because their truth was too complex?*
3. The Breath of Justice: *In what moment did I use my privilege to create silence, and in what moment did I use it to create space?*

This is the preparation required to walk back into the room the next morning, not as an expert with a plan, but as a human ready to be part of the world once more.

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### References

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#### About the Author

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