

MEETINGS WITH REMARKABLE EDUCATORS

PODCAST TRANSCRIPTION OF

Doug Selwyn

with host

Ba Luvmour

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Ba Luvmour: Welcome to ***Meetings With Remarkable Educators***. This podcast is brought to you in part by you, our friends and supporters at ***patreon.com/remarkableeducators***. Each podcast is a dialogue between me, Ba Luvmour, and an educator who sees the greatness in their students and touches the whole of their being. These educators defy generalizations. So here's a little bit about what they've done and how I know them.

Ba Luvmour: Today's guest is Doug Selwyn, a man of really incredible experience. Long years teaching at elementary, high school, and the university level. And he has a very unique and succinct way of describing health and wellbeing in children, and especially how to bring that forward in a public school environment; in fact in any education environment. And it's great because you move all the way to what does it really mean to teach? And how can we bring that forward? How can we hold the children uppermost in our mind even within current educational institutions? So it's my great pleasure this week to welcome my guest, Doug Selwyn.

Welcome Doug, and thank you so much for joining Meetings with Remarkable Educators. We're really excited to have you here today. So thanks for coming on.

Doug Selwyn: Thanks for inviting me. I'm looking forward to it.

Ba Luvmour: All right, well as our listeners know I love to jump right in, and I know that in your latest book one of the questions that you really pose for all of us that I think is just critical to consider is what does health and well-being really look like in a child and our children? How does that relate to education? And then what does that mean for us? How should we respond to a different understanding of health and wellbeing?

Doug Selwyn: Well I think for me it starts with recognizing that if children aren't healthy and if their health and wellbeing are not being served at school, they're not going to be learning at their optimum level, and we are not really serving them. So this all came about for me through my teaching. It was clear that some students were better served than others, that some students were coming to school terribly unhealthy, let's say. And that when they attempted to learn, there was a lot getting in the way. And that what was happening at schools was actually undermining their health rather than supporting it.

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Ba Luvmour: In what ways was it undermining their health? I get it that different kids come with different health expressions or different health at different times, but in what ways does school undermine that health?

Doug Selwyn: Well let me go back to maybe the first question you asked, which what does it mean to be healthy? When I investigated that what came up through my research, which involved a lot of reading, involved talking with people, and my own observations, what came clear is that what we refer to as health is much more than physical health. So physical health is certainly part of it but there's also an emotional health, a social health, I would say an economic health. A sense of well-being that encompasses the whole child. And I know that's an area you spent your life investigating. And so when I looked at what was happening at school both in my high school classes, but then down in my elementary classes, there was much that happened that left children feeling less whole, less well overall. One example would be, the high stakes testing regime that we are under still. When my second language learners would take those tests and be absolutely stymied by page, after page, after page of meaningless context-less passages they were supposed to be performing with in their second or third language, they came out feeling failures. Well when you're feeling a failure you're less healthy. You're feeling less healthy and your health is compromised.

For some of them, days long tests were really a traumatic experience. And this is after a full year of engaging fully with what we were doing in the classroom in ways that did not set them up for failure, but instead set them up for success. When I think about the students who learn differently and are forced to move at a pace that doesn't match who they are as learners, they end up feeling like failures, which makes them less healthy.

Ba Luvmour: Doug I have to interrupt you. That is just brilliant. I haven't heard that said in such a succinct way. And of course it's near and dear to my heart, but also I just ... Let's underline that one. When children feel failure they are less healthy. They know wellbeing less than they should. That's just great. I haven't heard that connected that way before.

Doug Selwyn: And when you think ... I'm thinking back now to high school, when I'm teaching US history for example, and what it says in the book essentially is an incomplete history that takes an entirely European American point view, and only features other cultures as sort of bit-players in the American story, which is really the European American story. You're robbing kids of their history. And you are

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lessening their sense of themselves and their families and their cultures, which makes them less healthy. We're lying to them. And if we want healthy kids, we have to begin by starting to tell the truth.

Ba Luvmour: Whoa, so that's also really a radical and intense, and again tremendous I guess succinct way of saying that. So are there other ways other than ... You mentioned the humanities and also the failure on tests, are there other specific aspects in which we're undermining wellbeing in these seemingly subtle but hardly subtle ways?

Doug Selwyn: Well I would say the whole structure does that. Because the tests have taken over. The definition of being well educated is did you score well on a test. When schools and teachers are guided by ... Well I'm sorry, we'll probably have to edit this a-bunch. But there's so much, it's so complicated and entangled.

Ba Luvmour: Take your time. And it's not a problem.

Doug Selwyn: Okay. So let's start with the idea that the definition of success at school is now simply how well you do on two tests essentially. The ELA test [English/Language Arts] and a math test. So let's say that your particular gifts are *not* ELA and math. Let's say that you are really skilled at movement, or at working with your hands, or at any number of things that aren't tested. You come away with a low test score. Your intelligence isn't valued and your intelligence, your passions, your interests are essentially irrelevant. Well there you are feeling a failure again. So that's another piece. But more than that, when the entire curriculum is dedicated to essentially test preparation, then those students who have passions or interests or curiosities that don't align with the test prep find out that what they care about doesn't matter, isn't important, and that there isn't time for that. So you are denying kids who they are. So, when you are denying somebody who they are, you're denying them their health, their sense of self, and that's another way in which we diminish them, make them less healthy.

Ba Luvmour: I appreciate this. And in my work there's also the quality that the relationship with ... There's not a real relationship with the teacher. That the teacher is delivering the test based information, and there's a quality of personal relationship that is missing. And that seems critical to me. Is that true in what you're saying as well?

Doug Selwyn: Yes, and I was actually heading there. Because what happens when all of that is determined from the outside is that any personal

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efficacy is removed. I mean your sense of yourself and what's important to you is taken away because somebody outside of you, outside of the classroom is determining what's going to happen there. So the student feels less connected, that it's a less meaningful experience, because they really are simply passive. They're told what to do. But the same thing happens to the teacher. When the teacher is told, here's what you will do, and here's how fast you will do it, and here's how you will assess what's going on etcetera, you're removing the meaning from the teacher as well. Who has come into this work, not to be a mindless robot.

Ba Luvmour: To say the least.

Doug Selwyn: Or a burger flipper, which is essentially what they're trying to do. But has a sense of the sort of passion for working with kids and getting to know who they are and working with them in terms of their learning strengths and all those other things that we presumably are there to do. And we've been told no, don't do that, because that doesn't matter. It simply gets in the way. And so what happens is that the teachers tend to disengage as well.

Ba Luvmour: When I taught a Portland graduate, the graduate school of education here at Portland State, and I taught a course, or offered a course in *burnout*. And what surprised the participants over and over, was they came back again and again to the lack of meaningful relationship with the students. Not to time off, not to pay, not to other issues at all. But first over and over again was, we don't have relationship with our learners, and that's what we came for.

Doug Selwyn: Well and going along with that, when I taught high school I had 150 students in five classes. There were like three or four minutes in between classes. And there was an encyclopedia sized ... Do people still remember what encyclopedias are? Anyway, there was an encyclopedia sized list of factoids that we had to cover during the year. Which meant that there really wasn't time to get to know the students except through, if somebody came in at lunch or after school, or whatever. But during class we were busy and there were 30 of them. So the people I got to know were probably the people at either end of the learning spectrum. People who were hungering for more because they were just so passionately into it, or people who were really struggling and needed some extra help, and stood out in some kind of way. But in terms of really having a meaningful relationship with 150 kids a day, is not going to happen. That's another piece of the structure that really undermines getting to know and creating a healthy relationship. And when I looked at what is it in schools that supports healthy kids, number one,

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absolutely number one on the list was a strong deep relationship with at least one adult in the school, hopefully more, who would advocate and stand with and care about each child.

Ba Luvmour: That's also true in the resilience literature, which is amazing and dates back to children from World War II concentration camps, right up to today's refugee camps. And that is, the single most important thing is a strong consistent person who will stand in on what is well-being over and over and over with the child. So that carries through even in extreme circumstances.

Doug Selwyn: I agree of course. The other way I think it really has a strong impact on the health of kids is, who is actually hired to work in the schools. So if you're district is being judged by test scores, you're going to hire a superintendent who is all about test scores. Who is in turn going to hire principals who are all about test scores, who are in turn going to hire teachers who are all about test scores. And that unfortunately pushes out a lot of the people who should be teaching, who say I don't want any part of this or are not going to get through the teacher education programs that will require them to take tests and jump through hoops that they want no part of. And so the whole structure of the setup leaves everybody less healthy, but it's invisibly done. You don't see the people who are not there, you simply know who's there. And I don't mean to imply that those people who are teaching are not good caring people, but a lot of the folks who would be amazing teachers either choose to leave right away, or never choose to enter. And so those who are entering education these days especially, are people who survived in a test heavy environment.

All the students I worked with at the university who came in, in the last 10 years anyway, all survived through no child left behind. Succeeded enough that they said yeah, I want to go teach. So that system somehow worked for them. And so they were not horrified by what was being done, because it was done to them and they still wanted more of it.

Ba Luvmour: So I'd like to get a little bit ... There are two avenues that you've brought up that I really want to make sure we explore here carefully.

Doug Selwyn: Okay.

Ba Luvmour: One is you're describing a whole wealth of personal experience. And I wonder if you can just tell us about your actual background and engagement as an educator?

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Doug Selwyn: Well, I went to college in the late '60s, graduated in 1970. And walked out the door swearing I'd never enter another classroom ever again.

Ba Luvmour: Where'd you go to school?

Doug Selwyn: University of Pennsylvania. And it was during the wonder years of the late '60s where we were questioning everything. And school seemed not all that relevant. Anyway, so I graduated without a clear sense of what I wanted to do. Ended up in the early '70s working as sort of a co-teacher-aid in a school for emotionally disturbed children that was in an institution. Which was an amazing experience, working with kids who had a wide, wide, wide, range of need. There were people who were borderline geniuses, people who were psychotic, people who were ... You name it. The only thing they had in common was they didn't fit in the rest of the world very easily. And nobody knew what to do, so we were on our own to figure it out, which was great. I mean, I'm sure we made mistakes, there's no doubt, but we also felt free to try things because nobody knew any better. And what became very clear was we had to meet the children where they were, whoever they were. Which was a real powerful and not easy lesson. And I started teaching ... Well I got my masters in social work. And decided I wanted to move into teaching because I wanted to work with kids before they needed social workers, before they were harmed. That was my illusion at least.

And so got my teaching degree and started working at high school, because that's where there was a job. So I taught social studies and language arts at high school for a few years, and then moved to middle school, and then moved down to elementary, which is where I really wanted to be...stayed there from 1984 to 2000. Within that time I spent three years as a mentor teacher, which was great. I was out of the classroom full-time working with first year teachers as a kind of an elder brother, supporting them during their first years, which was a wonderful program that really offered good support to teachers when they needed it most, which is during their first years. And then I moved to university in 2000 and just retired in 2017.

Ba Luvmour: So you have had a wealth of experience. And I just think it's really important to bring that forward. And that you are a frontline worker, and have looked at this so carefully from so many different angles. Speaking for myself, and I know for many listeners, thank you for your dedication and for hanging in through all those different environments. It's really special.

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Doug Selwyn: Well I've had the opportunity to watch a lot different people teach, so I got to learn from quite an array of teachers.

Ba Luvmour: **It's teaching story time.**

Briefly, teaching stories invite us to see the world with a new perspective often featuring a wise fool or trickster animal they can be humorous with many shades of meaning shining through the story. I have told teaching stories for the past 40 years with great effect not only for the listener but for me as I have learned so much about myself through recounting these stories.

Today's story is called, "**Just As Well I Came Along.**"

The wise fool was walking past a well when he had the impulse to look into it. It was night, and as he peered into the deep water, he saw the moon's reflection there. I must save the moon, the wise fool thought, otherwise it will never wane, and it will never come back again.

He found a rope, threw it in, and called down.
"Hold tight, keep bright, succor is at hand."

The rope caught on a rock inside the well, and the wise fool heaved as hard as he could. Straining back, he suddenly felt the rope give as it came loose, and he was thrown onto his back. As he lay there panting, he saw the moon riding in the sky above.

"Glad to be of service" said the wise fool. "Just as well I came along, wasn't it?"

Let's have some fun interpreting this teaching story. Become a Patreon supporter at [patreon.com/remarkable educators](https://patreon.com/remarkableeducators). And you'll have access to our detailed comments on how this story applies to education and parenting. Of course, that's just our perspective. The fun comes with community dialogue as the many shades of the teaching story come alive. See you there.

Ba Luvmour: A minute ago you were referring to teacher training and that the teachers now have come through what we'll call the entire testing culture, and I was wondering do you see the teacher training as a leverage point to bring better health and wellbeing into the schools?

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Doug Selwyn: I think it has to be. If we don't work with teachers to appreciate number one, that the goal of education is not testing but is to serve the children, rather than to serve the children to the system, if we don't do that I think there's no hope. Because the number one advocate in the building has got to be the teacher. And if the teachers have not experienced it themselves as students, they won't know what's missing.

Ba Luvmour: So what would you specifically do? I would guess you have some specific ideas as to how you would organize teacher training. And I'm asking from a personal point of view, because I see that as the leverage point. The teachers are the ones with the young people, and were they to be able to organize differently it would make a world of difference. So do you have any specific ways or ideas that you might bring about in the teacher training curricula?

Doug Selwyn: Well, I can reference my own work in terms of what I have learned to do, which is not to say it's the best thing possible but it was the best thing I could figure out. Was to recognize that many of the students I was working with had no experience with the kind of teaching that I valued, the student centered teaching. They'd never experienced it. So the first thing is, is to make sure that when we are working with students, we are working with them in ways that we hope they will work with their students. To model, but also give them the experience of having choice. I can't tell you how many students at the college level said to me when they had writing assignments that gave them room to choose what they were going to research and write about, that they'd never had that experience before. They'd been told what to do. They'd been treated with no respect, as if they had nothing internal to offer. No questions, no curiosity, nothing. They were simply told what to do and they did it. And when they had the opportunity to actually bring themselves to assignments, and they could take a look and say oh, this is actually fun, then there was room to say, and you can do this with your students. So giving them experience in having a curriculum that actually included them as makers as well as doers, I think is important.

Ba Luvmour: Mm-hmm (affirmative). No doubt.

Doug Selwyn: So that's one piece. I think another piece is giving them a range of experience in classrooms with people who are really good, but recognizing that where the school is located may or may not be where they end up teaching. So figuring out how we can make sure that they have experience with a range of populations, and a range of experienced teachers from a range of populations. So I'm talking

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racial, I'm talking ethnic; I'm talking income level or whatever. So that they are prepared to recognize how to be in an environment that isn't one they know so well. I mean one of the problems is, that many of the teachers certainly in my classes, but in the classes I have observed elsewhere, many of the teachers come from essentially white middle class communities. And then where the openings are, are in communities that are very different than what they grew up in. So they don't understand the population. And it's not to blame them for not understanding, the blame would be if they didn't try to get out and understand. And that's not easy.

So having some support to figure out, how do you recognize who kids are on their terms? How do you understand or begin to understand who their families are? And how do you work with them respecting who they are and how they move through the world, rather than insisting they move to essentially the agenda you know, which is a white middle class test centric agenda? That's another piece. Not easy to do. I taught in upstate, up near Canada where it was almost all white. How do you move diversity into that? But I think if you don't do that you're setting everybody up.

The third thing I think is to help introduce the students to a number of different models and approaches to education. Saying there's not only one way to do school. Because most of them assume that all school looks like what they experienced themselves. But there are a lot of different ways to educate people. And being aware of the choices that you get to make or could potentially make as an educator, I think is really important. So helping people know about *Freedom Schools*, about *Summer Hill*, about just the range of ways that education happens. And reminding people ... Well, okay. This is maybe ... It's linked but it's a separate category as well. Helping them think through what is the purpose of education? Why are we doing this?

Ba Luvmour: Well how would you answer the question I was asked all the time, which is, okay I get that, we've gone through a lot of that, and there's an understanding, but I can't bring it into this structure. You just in our podcast together described a structure that's pretty rigid, it's the way it's funded, all that sort of thing. So when the educators that I've worked with said well, how can I do that? What do I do about that? Because okay I realize I should use an inquiry based method, or a different way of approaching history, but that's not what these kids are going to be asked on a test. Or that's not the way I'm going to be judged as an educator. How do you answer that question when you're asked that?

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Doug Selwyn: Well, I guess there are three or four different aspects to how I respond. The first one is you have to decide **to whom do you owe your primary allegiance?** And it's not a simple question. But if your primary allegiance is to your students, that's where you have to start, no matter what else happens. So when somebody says, here's what the district says, and here's what the...this, and here's what the that, you're working with the children, your first allegiance is to them. And that you have to figure out that whatever is going on, you're going to make it as *student centric as possible*. So that's one piece.

The second is, that the idea that teaching people how to think, and to evaluate critically, and to recognize who they are as learners, is going to interfere with them doing well on a test, I think is short sighted. Anybody who is as fully aware if possible as themselves as a learner, and able to look critically at things, and to bring their whole person to what they're doing, is going to do better in whatever's in front of them; which includes the tests. So I don't think you have to turn people into mindless drones in order to score well on a test. You have to help them think, and recognize, and understand what their experiencing.

One of the things I used to do with my elementary students is I would teach them testing as a second language. So we'd do two weeks of that getting ready for testing. Because nothing else in the classroom looked at all like what they were expected to do on the test. So I had them create tests on Pokémon, because that's what they were into at the time.

Ba Luvmour: That's great. I love it.

Doug Selwyn: And they would create true and false questions, and multiple choice questions, and fill in the blank questions, and short essays, and whatever. And then they would give them to the adults in the building. I also taught some grammar that way, because I didn't really like teaching grammar. So I'd teach some of that in this testing as a foreign language unit. But mostly it was helping them understand, here's how the tests work. So here's how you can think about it. And then trust that at least for many of the students, the fact that they were familiar with the structure of the test would mean they were not simply turned off from the first page. That they had some chance to experience it without panicking, and could enter in a little more. So I think there are ways to introduce those structures without being limited by them. The other thing is, to recognize that there are a lot of different learners, and a lot of different ... you know, all the Gardner multiple intelligence work

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and all of that. To help people understand that what the tests are about is assessing one small segment of who you are.

And for those students who do not necessarily display their full knowledge and intelligence by filling in circles, making sure there are many other experiences in the classroom that enable them to learn and demonstrate their learning in ways that were much more aligned with who they are, helped round out a picture of who they were, and helped make sure that whatever happened on the test was not damaging, and did not define them wholly as, “this is who you are.”

Ba Luvmour: So all of this, it sounds like it points to the arts. And I'm pretty sure that you're a fan of bringing the arts more strongly into the educational environment. Is that correct?

Doug Selwyn: Absolutely. But I'm a fan of bringing it all in. There are kids who certainly the arts are ... well I think the arts are primary learning material. It's essentially how we move through the world, and it emphasizes both creative, but it's how we find meaning. It's how we make meaning. And so yes absolutely the arts, but also for those kids who like to take things apart and put them together and build things. I'm thinking about a student who created a three dimensional map of Washington State. That was one of the options they had for an assignment. And it was the first time he'd ever gotten an 'A' on any assignment. He loved to build models. And he had a chance to build a model of the state. Well is that art? Maybe. But it's working with his hands, and for him that was crucial. So I think bringing every mode of learning and every interest possible ... I mean when a student presents an interest, displays an interest in something, figuring out a way to make that be part of the curriculum, or part of how they go about learning. To me the reason you become educated is to become more fully realized of who you are and how you can best move through the world.

So everything we can do to help that seems like a good idea. And everything that minimizes that seems like a bad idea.

Ba Luvmour: Well all of this seems like the mandate and the raison d'être for holistic schools and for many nontraditional approaches to education. Do you have any contact with any people from those communities? And do they influence you in any way?

Doug Selwyn: I haven't had a lot of formal contact. I certainly have read some folks and gotten as many ideas as I could from people who are moving in a more holistic way, but I'm not part of any organizations

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from that angle. I think it's a justice issue as much as it is ... I mean looking at children as whole people and not privileging some over others based on a very narrow yardstick seems to me a justice issue. And I think above all, schools should be about treating all children as deserving of our very best. And so I think approaching them as whole people with their own ways of being and knowing is really pretty crucial. The other thing, I think when we don't do that, we are continuing to support a hierarchical disequilibrium in our system that favors some and penalizes others. One of the things I found through my research is that the most significant factor in the health of a population ... And population health is a real key factor in all of this for me. But one of the most critical determinant of the health of a population is the degree of inequality in that population. More than anything else. The more unequal the population, the less healthy.

Ba Luvmour: Wow. So this social justice, what you mean by justice here is an entire culture and perhaps even worldwide, or planetary wide understanding of what a healthy child means? And means as you said, reorganizing from this state of disequilibrium. All your statements, I mean they resonate so deeply with me. And they also call upon a certain courage of the teacher to ... let's face it. Going to have to go against that district in some ways. Really of all of us to start re-looking at how we look at children, as a way to reorganize the basic wellbeing in the entire planet. Is that correct? Because it sounds like that.

Doug Selwyn: Well, it sounds a little large when you say that, but yeah. Because I think what schools do at this point is, and one of the reasons they keep getting funded to the meager degree they do, but at all, is because they help those in power to stay in power. We make a mistake when we think of schools as separate from the larger society in which they rest. And they are artifacts of the hierarchical increasingly unequal civilization or culture. And so, to the degree that we don't challenge or change to the extent that we can, we're perpetuating inequality. And we know that some groups are always going to end up on the short end of that stick. People of color are going to end up with lower test scores, and dropping out of school at higher rates, and being disciplined more, and all of those things that we know and we ring our hands at and don't do anything to change. And we know the people who are live in poverty. I mean you don't need to give test to find out how people are going to score. Simply look at zip codes. Again, we know that. If you come from a wealthier neighborhood, on average, you're going to get better test scores. That's not about intelligence, it's not about who people are, it's about something entirely other.

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And so if we don't work to change that, then we're perpetuating those things we came into education presumably to change. We came in to make things more just and more equal, and to serve the full range of kids we work with. But if we don't make changes, we're instead doing what we said we were against. We're perpetuating that inequality. So yes it's difficult, but otherwise I'm not sure what we're doing.

Ba Luvmour: Well Doug, I could talk to you for hours and hours and hours on these topics. And I deeply appreciate your view and share in all of it really...all the way through. And I know for me it's especially heartbreaking because then you see a young child who has those opportunities, and of all the places social justice breaks down, I know for me the most heart wrenching is when it happens with and towards children, especially in a systemic and institutional way. So that you bring attention to this is really heart rending to me. We're about out of time, and so I always like to ask, do you have one last thought you would like to leave our listeners with?

Doug Selwyn: I have several. But I guess the one I would most lead with is, it feels like there's little we can do, but there's lots we can do. So the idea that we can't do anything I think is false. If we decide that number one, we are going to form relationships with our children, we're going to listen to them in the classroom, we are going to recognize their interests and curiosities and honor those, we're taking a step towards making change. The other thing is to recognize that we as teachers have immense power. We're the ones who carry out the education. So if we stand together, if we say we are going to, at the very least, do no harm, as they say in the medical world, and that we're going to act together in the interest of our children, we have the power to actually change the system in a minute. It means standing together. Any one of us would get picked off. But if we all said no, if we all said yes to the children, who else is going to teach the kids?

Ba Luvmour: Really, who else is going to teach the kids?

Doug Selwyn: So I think we have power. We just have to recognize it and work together, and trust each other enough to stand together. So I think there's plenty of hope. I mean I was able to do things in my classroom, I've seen other people able to do things in their classrooms. Often administration just wants to know that parents aren't going to beat down their door. If the kids are happy, and the kids will be happier if we're listening to them, they're happy. So I think there's lots of room to do what needs to be done, **we just have to do it.**

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Ba Luvmour: Thank you Doug, and thank you so much for your work, and for joining us on *Meetings with Remarkable Educators*. We so appreciate it.

Doug Selwyn: Thank you for inviting me. I've enjoyed it.

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This is Ba Luvmour reminding you that, holistic relationships with children leads to joy and self-knowledge with the adults in their lives. With respect for you and for children everywhere. See you next time.