Dr. Debra Rominick Baldwin: A Take on Canadian and American Education

Caitlyn Worry
University of Dallas, cworry@udallas.edu

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Dr. Debra Romanick Baldwin: A Take on Canadian and American Education

Caitlyn Worry: I am here with Dr. Baldwin from the English Department at the University of Dallas and today is March 27, 2017. Dr. Baldwin, before we begin do I have your permission to conduct and record this interview and then submit the final transcript and recording to the University of Dallas Oral History Repository?

Debra Baldwin: Yes.

CW: Okay, so the first question is: What schools have you attended as a student, whether that is elementary, secondary, or higher education?

DB: Well, I think I went to a very short, uh, brief, pre-school program for a couple of days a week before kindergarten. I remember it very dimly. I remember going on a little bus and I also remember wearing my favorite green corduroy jacket. And I remember we were doing finger painting, and I remember a little boy licked his finger painting and then licked my jacket and got yellow paint on it. This was pretty much my only memory of this preschool program which was private and, as I say, just a short time period in my life. Then I went to kindergarten in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. It was half day kindergarten (at that time, kindergarten was only half-day). Then I went, continued on, to elementary school for two grades, one and two… umm… at which point I was transferred into an advancement program through the public school. So I went to another school that I was bused to, but I did grades three and four together and I stayed with that cohort of students through the end of grade eight. So I was bused to an elementary school until grade six, uh, until grade six, at which point I went to a middle school with the same cohort. It was all bused. Then after that, I went to a regular, local, public high school. In Canada at that time, high school was five years long: we had grade thirteen. Grade thirteen persisted until, oh,
sometime in the 1990’s, I think—maybe the 1980’s when they were under pressure to conform to
the American model, um, and switched it to a four-year high school. After that, I went to the
University of Toronto for four years and I got a double major in Political Science and
Philosophy. And then it was a large—let’s see—was the University of Toronto “public” or
“private”? I don’t think, there wasn’t really that distinction as much. I don’t know that there are
state schools in Canada – or maybe they all are. I think that it [the University of Toronto] is
something somewhat more akin to a state-like school than, say, McGill University, which
seemed to be—in my imagination—more private. It [the University of Toronto] seemed to be
[less private]. Nevertheless, it was my local university. As a Canadian, I never felt that same
thing that I thought of as an American experience of “going away” to college. Some kids did it,
but I knew where my grand piano and my car were [chuckles], and my dog, and I didn’t want to
leave them. So I was a commuter. And after that, I went to a graduate school at the University
of Chicago, where I got my M.A. and my Ph.D. from the Committee on Social Thought. I stayed
in Chicago for ten years, completing all of that program, and during the time I also worked in
their Adult Education Great Books program, which I loved very much… umm… and I guess that
is the end. That brought me to my Ph.D., which is my most recent degree.

CW: So, kind of going back to your elementary and secondary schools, what were those like?
And you can talk about whatever you like, but what were like the students like, the facilities like,
and did you have any extracurricular activities… what was kind of maybe a basic school like?

DB: Well I have very, very, very positive experiences of all the schools I have attended. I have
always loved school and I have always loved the schools I have been at. My experiences in
kindergarten, one, and two, involved great affection for the teachers I had at the time. I only had
one teacher during the day for each grade and I remember just the variety of activities – doing a
lot of writing stories and just feeling very, very challenged in a good way. I also remember the
process of being chosen to go to the advancement classes. They had a trailer or something set up. It was like a big bus, and I remember going into the trailer, being pulled out of class, and going into the trailer, and being given a barrage of puzzles and tests and interviews. And I was very excited about it. I remember the first thing they said to me was, “Oh look, the previous boy that was here made a mess on the floor here!” (maybe like match sticks, something dangerous) and I remember thinking to myself, “that is such a set-up, there is no way they just let him leave it, they obviously planted it for me” [giggles] So there was some manipulation. I also remember getting speech therapy. I had a lisp. I couldn’t do my r’s and I remember going to speech therapy and playing Concentration with cards that all had r’s on them – which I’m pretty sure they still do with kids. It was fun. I loved being taken out of class. I don’t remember very many extracurricular activities besides playing the piano. I didn’t do sports other than playing myself and with my friend over at the school sometimes. When I went to Sunnylea [Elementary School], which was the school that was the advancement classes, things changed somewhat because I was bused to school. And I felt very special – and the cohort of students there was very, very close. To this day, we have a Facebook page for that group. My oldest friend, I consider to be my oldest friend, is someone I met in grade three. I don’t remember the extracurricular activities, although I do remember field trips like going orienteering. What I remember is just all sorts of exciting opportunities. One of the Language Arts teachers, who actually went to go on to become a Jungian therapist, was involved in these. I don’t know if you are familiar with – I don’t know if the educational background include – these activities, but they involve small groups discussing moral conundrums: “If six people are in a boat – here is their profile – how would you decide who gets saved and who doesn’t?” I remember she had us do those things, and she also had us do
journaling, and she also had us do *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and she also had us do a project on *The Chronicles of Narnia*. I got to pick the topic in which, um, I was able to explore the texts on levels I had never considered before, on the allegorical and literal level. And I also remember she brought in a speaker who described the politics of fairytales—how “Ring Around the Rosie” was actually written during the plague, and “Mary, Mary Quite Contrary” was about Mary Queen of Scots—all of these underlying political realities of those things. And those experiences I remember feeling that my college education picked up on once again. It was the reason I went into political philosophy, in part, was this curiosity about the political context of fairytales. And that project on *The Chronicles of Narnia*, made me excited about literary texts and the layers of literary text. So all of that was an astonishing experience, really—the opportunities that that program gave me. When I went to high school, I remember I was very full of myself because I had been with these, been with these smart kids (and many of them have gone on to do great things). One of them is a pediatrician in California and has worked on amazing child advocacy things. One of them became a tennis player at Wimbledon and now teaches tennis. It’s a remarkable little group. And I remember thinking—I didn’t know that at the time, but I suspected—that it all felt very special. And I think there are negative things to an experience like that. I remember when I went to high school, a regular high school, I just figured I was going to be some sort of genius because I hadn’t interacted with regular students. And I remember after the first report card and I got, I guess, a couple of grades in the 80’s (I didn’t work particularly hard, because I was someone for that things came easy, so my work ethic was notoriously bad) and I remember the girl behind me asking what I got, and I showed her my grades and she should me her grades and they were all in the 90’s, the higher 90’s. I was just, remember feeling, “Huh? Oh my goodness! Here was someone that went to regular school and she is getting higher grades
than me!” And so for me, high school was a very integrative process for me, where I realized I was a regular, normal person like everybody else, and I had to work hard, like everybody else—that some things I was good at, naturally, and other things I had to work harder for. And I got very involved in activities. I want to add something about assessments. We did not get graded until grade six, and we only got comments. And I have every one of my report cards. There were little boxes – I guess they started with about ten boxes in kindergarten and they gradually multiplied all of these boxes for all of these criteria of assessment—and each box got a sentence. I remember very clearly – usually my report cards were good – but I remember one box, under language arts, said: “Debbie is very long-winded” [chuckles] and I have often thought back to the perspicacity to that comment and its, uh, prophetic quality, landing me in a place where I can be long-winded. But this notion of comments, the value of those comments, so many of them, not just that one that was funny, but other ones that encouraged me, encouraged my strengths, praised my imagination, praised my perseverance, praised my ability to organize—those articulations of what was allowing me to succeed—were very helpful to me. And in fact, my sister credits her going on into medicine to a comment she received, praising her leadership qualities, that stuck with her, her whole life. I say this because the single biggest difference I notice in my education and my children’s education now is the movement away from the power of the sentence—the descriptive sentence. The power to articulate what is going on, what is succeeding or what might not be succeeding in the actions of an individual child. Numbers were a shock to me in grade six, I don’t really remember what grades I got. I think they were both a shock—in the lack of the ability to describe and their novelty—in this strange way that they were suddenly evaluating on a single scale that which I naturally had come to appreciate as not being on a single scale. And I think that ability to receive evaluation as a descriptive flourishing, a
description of flourishing, rather than ranking, has informed my understanding of education ever since, and I lament the decline of that way of evaluating.

CW: So, in grade six, did it just completely transition into just numbers?

DB: Oh, not at all, it was a combination of numbers and comments, and the comments always endured as the most important – until high school, when I started to get more competitive. In high school, I started to worry about my grades more. I mean, I actually worried about my grades in grade seven and eight because I was trying to get into this one program, which they ended up not having any places in. But, there was a (I cared about the grades, but for all the wrong reasons) there was never a point – I would never in my (until a college transcript, I guess) in elementary, middle and high school, never: I don’t think I ever got a grade without a comment.

CW: So, we kind of already have touched on this, but what are some similarities and differences between your schooling in Canada and that that you have seen in America either and… I mean you have kind of already touched with some of the differences with what you see with your kids, but was it that kind of difference you see as well as a teacher?

DB: Well, there are many levels to take to consider that question. One is on the micro level and another is on the macro level. On the micro level, I am struck by certain similarities between— and continuities between—my education and the education of my children, that they are receiving in the Irving Independent School district (they both attend public school). Kids are kids. Education is largely social, as well as academic or intellectual, and I am struck by the enduring dreams of elementary and middle school and the enduring curiosity of kids to read, to read certain series. For me it was Narnia and Nancy Drew, and these various detective [stories] – I guess the Encyclopedia Brown I loved – my daughter loves Wings of Fire – and my kids have
gone through certain series they love, and it’s wonderful to see that continuity. I am struck by the
different evaluation, the different means of evaluation. I am struck by the difference. The
continuity is the difference an individual teacher can make. We have had some good teachers
with my kids and some not so good teachers. And a bad teacher – for example, my son’s grade
seven geometry teacher – was a catastrophe. And my son, who is actually a year ahead now in
math (he is grade ten, but is taking calculus in grade eleven and has scored highly on the pre-
SAT) he is someone that ought to have loved his math classes because he is gifted at math. Yet,
he had one teacher who so alienated him and so caused him—I hate to blame, so let me pull back
for a second: her classroom created the conditions in which he did poorly because the
expectations and the teaching itself were so negative and even incompetent. So the power of an
individual teacher! I don’t think I had a teacher quite that bad. I remember having a teacher that
yelled at everybody and created a very fearful environment which just kind of dried up the
learning as I experienced it. Uh, differences: We heard the Lord’s Prayer every morning. This
was a public school and the year after I left high school, they changed it to a moment of silence.
I say that for the record, not for any particular advocacy or opposition. I still correspond with a
Muslim girl whom I remember in grade eight always stepped outside the class while we said the
Lord’s Prayer every morning. And I asked her—we sort of felt badly about it, as a group, later,
years later, on Facebook, we were like, “Sonya, what was that like?” You know, we felt so badly
that she had to step outside. And she didn’t mind it at all! She said she was fine with it and it
sort of made her – I don’t want to quote her exactly, but something to the affect that – it made
her feel special and it wasn’t this big trauma that we thought it might be. Now fundamentally for
me, especially high school and maybe elementary school was a very integrative experience. I got
to be with all sorts of kids and I really enjoyed that. And this is also what my own kids are
experiencing right now as well. They have a variety of friends from a variety of backgrounds, some rich, some poor, some English (ESL), some English, you know native language, and that is a really wonderful thing. I don’t know if I am answering your question. I am kind of long winded aren’t I?

CW: You’re good! So, my next question is, what are some differences between teachers in Canada and those in America? Like are there different teaching styles you see or is it kind of similar to what you experienced?

DB: My middle school experience or upper elementary and middle school experience was very similar to the Montessori-influenced teaching that I see going on right now in the public schools. I should add, my kids went to a Montessori school before they went to a public school. This was a decision we made in part because my son had attended Mother’s Day Out programs by the local churches before kindergarten because we didn’t need full blown day care, but we needed a little bit of childcare and the Mother’s Day Out programs fulfilled that need perfectly for us. And then that, in that context, there was a lot of fear and prejudice against the public-school system. We had just moved here from Philadelphia, and before that Chicago, and before that Toronto. As a Canadian, the thought of going to private school was the weirdest thing the world. There were some Catholics that went and we could never understand why they did that. It just seemed like such a way to compartmentalize yourself away. And I thought the uniforms were ridiculous and also very improper. I mean, the Catholic girls would hike up their skirts in a way that I found sort of licentious. I know that sounds funny, but I actually thought that Catholic school girls were kind of loose and somehow, in my public school, I was more proper. I’m just saying that for the record; it was its own type of prejudice. So, then I came here and I heard all this prejudice – “Oh, my gosh, you can’t go to the public school! There will be drugs and all these terrible things and
besides, you have this little brilliant child, and Marshall was our little sort of… he was a – what’s the word I’m looking for… I don’t want to say he is a prodigy, that just sounds too inflated – he was a smart cookie. And it felt to us, as older parents, not even knowing if we would ever have another child, that we needed to give him the absolute best. So, as a result, Montessori just seemed like a perfect fit. And indeed it was, because Montessori allows the child, especially in early years, to be very self-motivated. And Marshall, our son, is the world’s lowest maintenance child ever. I mean, he has just always kind of been that way. You wind him up and let him go. He just does what he is supposed to do. So, he flourished extraordinarily well, and then, when we had our daughter, who is the yin to his yang, not because she is not clever, but because she has all sorts of interesting learning needs. She had speech problems. She had some sorts of delays. She also had a mind that seemed to approach things in a way simultaneously from different angles which made all the practical skills of Montessori very difficult for her. And she had orthopedic problems as well. So and we just suddenly saw that Montessori was doing nothing for her at all and the teachers were unable to describe even how she was different—and, more importantly, what was wonderful about her… right?… which is sort of the, surely the key to every good teacher is to see each student individually and notice what is wonderful about that student and therefore what that student needs in order to learn. I don’t know that I do that myself, but I recognize what I should be doing… and Montessori was failing our daughter horribly. Meanwhile, the Irving Independent School district was giving her speech therapy even though she wasn’t part of the school system class-wise. And we discovered this huge treasure of competent, descriptive support. She got all sorts of testing. She got a therapist being able to describe what she needed. So, we decided. And meanwhile Marshall, who had gone up to grade five in Montessori, was discovering that Montessori, while it is great for kindergarten and early-
elementary school students, at a certain point our experience was, that it gets utterly by rote and boring. They have to do these “works,” which consist of copying things out from a card. The most boring and the self-driven activities end up being very constraining and uninteresting. So we transferred both kids into the public-school system. Marshall went into grade six and Clara went into kindergarten and she ended up repeating her kindergarten year she had done at Montessori, which had actually turned out to be a good thing. And we were much, much, much happier there. So, I’m not sure where this has led in terms of the differences from Canada. I believe, I myself was able to get accommodation for giftedness in my experience and what I have seen is exactly the same sort of flexibility and accommodation in the public school now. As I mentioned, my son was a grade ahead in math. In grade eight, the school bused him to the high school so that he could take a grade nine class in the morning, which I thought was an extraordinary accommodation which also set him back on track to love math again, after his disaster in grade seven. Our daughter continues to get special support for her various problems, her challenges, and we have really loved a lot of the teachers and principals we have worked with. And so, I tend to find very much similarity between the two public school systems.

CW: What have you seen through the years, in regards to student academic performance or behavior? Have things gotten better or worse and how would you say that this aligned with what you experienced in Canada as student?

DB: Well, it is hard to know what my particular sampling tells. My teaching began with adult students in Chicago who were all educated, driven, and interested in the great books, as a cultural group, an intrinsic good. [They were] brilliant, brilliant students who gave me a completely false since of what teaching was. Because I could walk in and go “Nu?” and they would all start talking at a very high level! So, that was an education for me. It was a wonderful thing and I
don’t know if or how we can tap into and encourage people to turn into those people for our
generation. Then I taught at Villanova and I taught a course in their Core Humanities Program
and also some honors courses. I taught there for five years and I have taught here at the
University of Dallas for almost seventeen years. So in those years of teaching undergraduates,
the most significant change I have noticed is simply punctuation (chuckles). I do think that
students now are grammatically challenged in a way that they just weren’t when I was either
growing up or first teaching. There have just always been minor issues with subject-verb
agreement and commas and semicolons, but never quite on the scale that I regularly see now. Is
that a substantive difference is that a crucial decline? I’m not convinced that it is. I think of it as
a formal challenge that I think it’s worth figuring out how to address, but I don’t think – I don’t
see as – a substantive difference.

I do feel another change is that students are more pressured in their college. This is my
perception: that they are more pressured to think about their careers. And they don’t accept –
they don’t accept as easily – the gift of undergraduate education as the deepest and most
wonderful time of leisure where they can deepen themselves as human beings. When I went to
university (and in Canada we called it “university,” not “college”), “college” was something that
one was meant to go to for vocational training. But to go to university was to get an education
and not to be trained for a career—to be educated, to learn about the great human questions. To
be educated was to learn another language. To be educated was to know something about Latin.
To be educated was to be able to speak with a broad and deep wisdom and to be aware of all the
cultural ideas that shape civilization and that was an ideal that I felt very strongly. Personally, it
was an ideal conveyed by my family. It was an ideal my grandparents didn’t have [the
opportunity to enjoy]. They came from small villages in the Ukraine, but they looked up to
learning and the sanctity of learning as something very important. So, it was actually never a
question for me whether or not I would go to University. That was the ideal that I aspired to.
Now, what I would do after University – whether I would become a doctor or a lawyer, because
that were my only two options growing up, right? (chuckles) – you know, you got your choice,
either a doctor or a lawyer – that was not an issue. And the idea of graduate school was very
new to me, you know. I would go on to graduate school in what I thought would be Philosophy
but turned out to be Literature. But that was something that I had to sort of come to on my own.
I don’t know if students now have that same confidence in going to University and I don’t know
if the University is sufficiently holding up that ideal, that beautiful vision, with enough
confidence. Because the fact is, once you have that, then the practical things will follow. You
will have the other skills that allow you to succeed. You will have the ability to communicate
that will allow a company to hire you, or that will allow you to find your own company. But it’s
having the confidence growing as a human being and having an intellect that counts—that
doesn’t just “get grades,” but that enters into the human conversation.

**CW:** What evolution have you seen, in regards to educational issues and concerns?

**DB:** Well, as I said, for me growing up, private school was a strangeness. I realized there were
certain people who sent their kids to Catholic school, perhaps for religious reasons. I realized
that there were other people who sent their children to prep-like, upper class private schools like
Branksome Hall in Toronto, schools for the very wealthy. And this was very comical to me
because I knew that I was going to go to University and *that* would level those economic
differences. So, I just thought that both of those options were funny strangeneneses. The thought
that that would actually be a real option for me would have never crossed my mind. I didn’t
know I was ever going to move to Texas, either. But the thought of the culturally private school
as being a respectable option at the pre-college level? Colleges are a little bit different because colleges have always been a place of quirkier paths, not the shared education – the necessarily shared education – for all. College was the thing that not everyone necessarily wanted to go to, or would go to in the same way, so “private” there didn’t seem to be strange. But high school and lower? That, that, that’s the education of the country. That’s the education of the whole culture. And the idea that there would be a private element to that as a mainstream option was very strange to me – and remains strange to me. The idea that you could have homeschooling, is so far beyond the pale, so far off the scales of what seems strange to me (seemed and seems strange to me) that it is hard to quite figure out how a parent could make that choice. I believe that parenting by definition is “homeschooling.” Every parent reads and works with the intellectual development of his or her child. But that is a far cry from something else that children need, which is to be part of their community and their country. And also, to see what is going on outside of the family, that is one of the hardest things to see growing up: to see that your family is not every family (chuckles). I remember working as a nanny one summer and noticing the different habits in this other family, and how astonished I was that this other family had a completely different culture. And I’m not talking about nationality or some different type of food. I’m talking about dynamic. We just had a very different family dynamic and that illumination of experiencing another family – with different assumptions about how to act and how to think – was just mind blowing for me. And that is a part of what all education must be.

CW: What are your predictions for the future, in regards to American education?

DB: I’m not the one to ask for predictions, I don’t know if a single prediction I’ve ever made politically has come to pass except in the most general and uninteresting and unhelpful way. So I can’t predict what will happen. I do worry, however, about the increasing balkanization of
education. I worry that people will retreat into little circles that cannot talk to one another—and worse, because they don’t have experience of other circles—caricature and fear the other circles. I think that this trend makes us smaller as people and as a nation and it saddens me very much. So my fear is increasing balkanization. But my hope is that there are a lot of smart people out there that surly recognize this. There are surely smart people out there that know that although a few excellent parents can give their children perhaps an excellent homeschool education, that example means that there are a lot of less excellent (or perhaps even dangerous) people who could have the same idea with their own children—and that the larger picture is not a good one. So if enough thoughtful people can realize the larger implications of balkanization, then I think we can all talk and perhaps arrive at some compromise. One such compromise is, I understand, that the Irving School District does allow some integration of part of homeschooling for some children. I’m not sure what the details of this are, but it seems to me that the public-school system does have some accommodation for students whose parents want them to be homeschooled in certain subjects. I don’t know exactly how that works, but I believe that can happen. I think there can be all sorts of initiatives that develop a shared understanding. I do think that it is crucial for the survival of our culture, that we can all talk to one another and that our education must be integrative as well as excellence driven.

CW: So, that was my last question, but is there anything else that you might like to add to this? With anything?

DB: Hmm. Only that the enduring human spirit gives me hope. That sounds like a cliché, but I mean it sincerely. One can’t work around children without being in complete awe at their joy, their uniqueness, their curiosity. And as long as there are children, there is hope. And I think that, I do wish that more people had had the experience of— (phone rings with a “drumbeat”
tone) That’s a really funny soundtrack… I should tell the tape recorder, the iPad: that’s my telephone, not an ominous (chuckles) incoming call… there we go! It’s going to voicemail.

(chuckles)—I wish more people could experience the positive experiences that I have had with public school education because I believe that public school is one of the greatest contributions that this country has given to our world and that public school makes possible the very process of democracy. And I hope, I hope, that there will be strong voices who can articulate the case for public school in our future.

**CW:** Awesome. Well thank you so much for doing this, and this concludes the interview.