

Fall 9-2016

Educational Changes in a Developing World: An Interview with Mrs. Barbara Khirallah

Teresa Roach

University of Dallas, troach@udallas.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.udallas.edu/oralhistory>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Roach, Teresa, "Educational Changes in a Developing World: An Interview with Mrs. Barbara Khirallah" (2016). *Oral History Interview Projects*. 16.

<http://digitalcommons.udallas.edu/oralhistory/16>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Education at UDigital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral History Interview Projects by an authorized administrator of UDigital Commons.

Transcript: Interview with Mrs. Khirallah

1 **Teresa Roach:** Today is October 25th, 2016, and I am with Mrs. Barbara Khirallah in her office
2 in the education department of the University of Dallas. Thank you for allowing me to interview
3 you today.

4 **Barbara Khirallah:** My pleasure.

5 **TR:** Okay, so let's get started. My first question is this. What is your educational background?
6 Feel free to talk about where you've attended school, where you've taught school...

7 **BK:** Okay, well, my educational background is my life.

8 **TR:** Great.

9 **BK:** So growing up I actually attended schools in a lot of different places because my father was
10 in the military. Believe it or not, I went to six different first grades.

11 **TR:** Wow.

12 **BK:** In six different places and still learned how to read. And eventually, you know, I went to
13 school in, uh, Florida, Japan. I went to school in Ohio, in Texas, in Massachusetts, in New York.
14 I went to school in a lot of different places. And out of all of those, I have to say that sometimes
15 my fondest memories are the years I spent in Japan. When I graduated from high school I came
16 to UD and earned my bachelor's degree in English with a secondary certification here at UD, and
17 then taught... I taught both at the middle school level and then at the high school level. I student
18 taught right here in Irving at MacArthur High School. You know, I had a good experience. And
19 from there I married, we had children, and I went back to work on my master's degree which is
20 in educational administration from the University of North Texas. And then I started working on
21 my doctorate, which I got all the way through until I was a Ph.D. candidate at the University of
22 North Texas when my mom got ill, and she moved in with us and it was impossible for me to

23 finish my dissertation. So I left that but started another doctoral program at Texas A&M
24 Commerce. I was in the program for two and a half years until I broke my arm, and at that
25 moment I told myself, “You know, I think God is telling me to stop,” so I stopped. So I have
26 lots, and lots, and lots of hours but no dissertation. So that’s why I am Mrs. Khirallah, not Dr.
27 Khirallah.

28 **TR:** Interesting, I did not know that.

29 **BK:** That’s what it was. So, other than that, I... as far as teaching, I started my, uh, I started my
30 teaching career at St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic School in Dallas. I was teaching out of my field,
31 which was really disturbing, given the fact that I got my job the day before school started. I
32 taught sixth, seventh, and eighth grade science, which was very scary. I taught religion, and I
33 also taught some language arts. A year later, I was [unintelligible] position within the Irving
34 Independent School District, and I came into Irving and taught both English to sixth, seventh,
35 and eighth graders, but I also taught French, because that was my minor here at UD. And then
36 over time, the district decided to add an introduction to foreign language course, which was half
37 French and half Spanish, and so I was required to learn Spanish on my lunch hour with the
38 Spanish teacher so that I could teach both the French and the Spanish portions of that intro
39 course. So I taught middle school for a while. I also taught at Mount Carmel High School in
40 Houston when I got married – taught English and French there. When North Lake Community
41 College opened its door, I actually went out and developed their ESL curriculum. Because I had
42 been working as – for the adult basic education program through DISD, well, Irving ISD,
43 actually, teaching people who have left Iran and left their country, so I was teaching English
44 second language here, and when North Lake opened, they asked me to come out and write the
45 curriculum. So I taught ESL at North Lake for eight, nine... nine years, good number of years.

46 Also, at this point my children were starting to get a little bit older and so I couldn't stay out of
47 education. I'm not much of a housekeeper, so I went up and created a job for myself as a
48 curriculum coordinator at Holy Family.

49 **TR:** Oh, wow.

50 **BK:** And got paid a grand sum of two thousand dollars a year, but it was enough money so that
51 other parents realized that I had a professional position, and it wasn't just, you know, some sort
52 of... position like a spoils position. So I had legitimacy and accountability. And after doing that
53 for a number of years, I worked on a project with a man who was then teaching here at UD, John
54 Crane. Dr. John Crane, he's a close friend and a good friend of Dr. Clodfelter's, and when he
55 finished, he told me that Dr. Hazel McDermott was retiring from UD, and that I ought to apply
56 for the position. I came up here and begged Dr. Clodfelter if she'd hire me. So in 1992, in
57 August of '92, I came to UD.

58 **TR:** Nice. Wow, that's so much.

59 **BK:** I know, it is a lot, but I've been teaching for forty-some years.

60 **TR:** That's so impressive, I was not expecting you to have that much information on it, so, well,
61 thank you. Okay, next question, then, is, what do you recall of the school organization, teachers
62 and teaching methods, and the curriculum in your elementary school experience?

63 **BK:** You know, I can tell you for a fact that I had really good teachers, generally speaking. But
64 it was very different. It was very different from the way it is today. I think one thing that I
65 specifically remember is the fact that there were no groupings in elementary school other than
66 single desks. Desks were arranged in rows, one after another, in straight lines. There were no
67 clusters of children sitting together because we, you know, it was really inappropriate to work
68 together on anything. Everything was supposed to be done independently.

69 **TR:** Interesting.

70 **BK:** Um, other things that I remember... Ms. Maguire, one of my first grade teachers, used to...
71 I can vaguely remember, funny as it seems, she used to collect data about what we had for
72 breakfast. Now, food groups were really different back in those days.

73 **TR:** Right.

74 **BK:** Yeah, they've changed. But she used to collect... she'd ask us every day what did we have
75 for breakfast, and she kept a little chart so we could see if we were in the various food groups.
76 And I remember, I hate to confess this, but I lied every day because I wasn't a breakfast eater. I
77 never have been. But I didn't want her to think ill of my mother, so I'd just tell her that I ate all
78 these fruits and whatever.

79 **TR:** That's funny.

80 **BK:** But anyway, schools were, you know, self-contained. All of the schools in my elementary
81 school were self-contained, all the way through fifth grade. I did not start changing classes until
82 sixth grade. Probably even seventh grade. I think it was self-contained through the sixth grade.
83 And then in junior high, I was actually in Japan at a school, a junior high in Japan, and we
84 changed... changed classes then. High school, it was really a lot about regurgitation. I mean, I
85 can remember just classes where teachers would stand in the front of the classroom, give you
86 notes, and that's what they wanted back on the tests.

87 **TR:** Interesting.

88 **BK:** Yeah, so it was quite a bit different...

89 **TR:** Cool.

90 **BK:** than what we see today, so...

91 **TR:** Yeah. Thank you, so, um, the next thing I have is, what do you consider to be the biggest
92 changes – well, you’ve kind of already touched on this, but I’ll just continue if you want to add
93 anything – the biggest changes in elementary school organization, teachers and teaching
94 methods, and curriculum since your school days? So is there anything you’d like to add to what
95 you’ve already said?

96 **BK:** Yes, well, not only the arrangement of desks, but, since my elementary days, corporal
97 punishment has been abandoned pretty much, because spankings were not unusual nor frowned
98 upon in the schools. I mean, it was a [unintelligible] form of discipline for the kids. I would say
99 the other thing, classroom management has changed dramatically in this regard. First of all, I
100 think children feel more free in classrooms today than they did when I was a child. I think there
101 was more fear associated with teachers than as compared to now, although children certainly
102 loved their teachers, but it was a lot more stilted process. You know, a stilted relationship
103 between children and teachers.

104 **TR:** So, um, can you clarify that a little bit more, the stilted relationship?

105 **BK:** Well, first of all, if you think about it, I mean, just the way we dressed. The teachers had to
106 wear dresses and suits and heels and hose, and little girls had to wear dresses to school, and boys
107 had to wear, you know, nice pants and shirts tucked in. So there was a dress code, but not
108 uniforms, by any stretch of imagination. You know, while we probably didn’t all have to say
109 “yes, ma’am” or “no, sir” and so on and so forth, that was the preferred way to refer back and
110 forth to teachers. Teachers, um – you know, I went to all public schools growing up. I didn’t
111 really any of the – I didn’t have any relationship with Catholic schools until I came to UD, and I
112 didn’t know what it was like to be friends with a teacher.

113 **TR:** Oh.

114 **BK:** It was – teachers were somebody who were at school. They were responsible for your
115 grades, and they were nice. I loved my teachers, but it was never considered a personal
116 relationship.

117 **TR:** Okay, and I was just wondering, did you find variety in relationships with teachers and
118 anything in the classroom between the different places, like all the different places around the
119 country that you moved?

120 **BK:** Yes, and it wasn't until, interestingly enough, the people who teach in schools on military
121 bases overseas are hired by the Department of Defense. Those were the teachers that probably
122 changed how I thought about my relationships with teachers. They were different. First of all,
123 they were all young because they had all left the country to go teach for a year or two in these
124 schools in Japan. And they were fun, and we... so it was very different from having older
125 teachers that had been in a school for a very long time.

126 **TR:** Okay. I see.

127 **BK:** Yeah. So, as far as from one place to another, teachers all seemed the same until I got to
128 Japan, and then they seemed young and fun.

129 **TR:** Got it, thank you. So the next question I have is, how did becoming a parent and then a
130 grandparent affect your focuses and concerns regarding the state of education in America? Did
131 anything change when you became a parent? Or a grandparent?

132 **BK:** Yes. Now... this has been a long process, here, Teresa.

133 **TR:** Okay.

134 **BK:** As a teacher, I mean, I love what I do. It's not even a job for me. Teaching is truly
135 vocational for me. And so it was really hard for me to understand why my own children didn't
136 love school.

137 **TR:** Oh.

138 **BK:** And... yeah, and they all went to parochial schools, and they had a relationship with
139 teachers, and they loved their teachers, and they loved their friends, but they weren't avid
140 students. Not until later. Now all of my children are very successful. They're lawyers and
141 educators, but, in the beginning, school was not... you know, they only did their homework
142 under threat of death. And I, so when I thought about education, I have to say that my concerns
143 were always about making sure that my children, you know, followed or could do whatever the
144 curriculum specified so they'd be successful in life. And I didn't think about failing schools or
145 reform in education. I just wanted my children to learn what they needed to learn in order to
146 move forward in their lives. Over time, I let go of that. I let go of it and began to realize that
147 schooling, for my children, I want my children to have the basics. I want my grandchildren to
148 have the basics. But I'm beginning to wonder whether or not it's not a little bit more important
149 that they fall in love with schooling rather than simply be – feel compelled to do homework, or
150 do all of this work on, you know, sort of a regimented schedule, and instead just fall in love with
151 what they're doing.

152 **TR:** That's a good point, and do you think that when you were young, and when you were in
153 school, you were in love with what you were doing?

154 **BK:** I was. And I think there were more opportunities for children to actually fall in love with
155 what they were doing because there were more... you know, there would be programs where the
156 kids would be singing and they'd have... in fact, they'd invite parents to come out and see the
157 kids in plays and music programs, and those things still exist but not with the frequency with
158 which we had them before. There was more art and aesthetics in the school. I think we spend
159 way too much time now on the head game.

160 **TR:** Do you think a lot of this has come from – like spending less time on the art – has it come
161 from the fear of like... not being sufficient in math and science?

162 **BK:** Exactly. I think, well, you know, 19 – what is it? – 57.

163 **TR:** Sputnik?

164 **BK:** Sputnik. I was all of eight years old when it happened, and I can remember even having an
165 experimental math program in middle school because of it – it’s called SMSG or something like
166 that – because the United States was going crazy trying to catch up with the Russians as far as
167 the space program was concerned. And I can’t even tell you how many different math
168 curriculums my children were introduced to across their school years. You know, “this is the
169 better program,” and so on and so forth. I think that... I believe strongly in education, but I think
170 we have spent so much time in working towards developing the academic part of school that we
171 have forgotten about, you know, developing our children into whole people. Because I am truly,
172 when it comes right down to it, I do believe in what Catholic education is all about, that
173 developing the whole child. And I like that. I think we’re... I think citizenship is a big problem
174 for kids today because, um, because... all we’re concerned about is test scores, and so behavior,
175 we don’t hold kids accountable in the same way for their behavior.

176 **TR:** Interesting. Okay, thank you so much.

177 **BK:** Okay.

178 **TR:** So next I have, in your years of teaching at UD, what have been the biggest changes you’ve
179 seen in the education department, its faculty, and its students? And do you think they were
180 positive or negative changes?

181 **BK:** Okay, I can tell you some – some of the changes I brought.

182 **TR:** Great.

183 **BK:** I brought to this department all of the technology, because when I got here, it was film
184 strips and old movie projectors, and I was the eighth person on campus to get an email address.

185 **TR:** Oh, wow.

186 **BK:** And there was such resistance to the internet, and I think... and nobody had laptops. It was
187 fascinating to watch that happen over time. I was fascinated with computers from day one, not
188 because I love computers but because I think that hypertext in the internet where you click on
189 things is the way learning works. It's not linear like you read a book and you turn page after
190 page, very linear. Learning is not like that. It jumps around the way links jump around, and we
191 go different places. So I've always loved the technology, so technology has been a huge change
192 at UD, uh, generally for the good. The core has remained relatively the same since I've been
193 here. There have been some adjustments to the core, I think positive adjustments. As far as the
194 students, the only change that I have seen in the students is the capacity for technology that
195 students come equipped with already. When I first started teaching computers, it took me a
196 month to teach students how to do email.

197 **TR:** Oh wow, that's crazy.

198 **BK:** Yes, because I was teaching computers before the year 2000. So it was, you know, it was
199 very different, and now of course I've had to change my computer class so many times, but the
200 students are the same. You people at UD are the same, and that's a very good thing.

201 **TR:** I like that.

202 **BK:** We have decent, young people from very good families who are very serious about their
203 schoolwork, but they're also very serious about, about... about the good, and I guess that's what
204 I can say. But that's not to say that you all don't have fun, because I love to watch UD students
205 have fun. Good fun.

206 **TR:** Sure.

207 **BK:** So. Anyway, so I don't think that much has changed, just the technology piece.

208 **TR:** How about anything about the education students in particular? I've heard that there are
209 fewer education majors than before... is this true?

210 **BK:** It's true right now, but it remains to be seen whether or not that's going to stay put. It has
211 been cyclical. I have to laugh, when I first got here, a year into my time here at UD, I... the
212 numbers in our department went up pretty significantly. I was quite sure it was because of me...
213 but of course it wasn't. The numbers go up and down. This time, though, I think there's a
214 different reason for why our numbers are going down. I do think that... I think charter education
215 is taking hold in the United States, and with good reason. I think parents want the best for their
216 children, and they're looking for places... they're desperately seeking places where their
217 children can be, one, safe. Two, well-educated. And three, engaged in their learning. And I
218 think a lot of our traditional public schools have kind of lost their way, and hopefully they'll find
219 it again.

220 **TR:** So how do you think that this has impacted, maybe, our numbers going down?

221 **BK:** Well, it's because of certification. I think there are fewer people that come to our
222 department because our department, up until last year, didn't even have a concentration. And so
223 now that we have a concentration, we can at least accommodate students that don't need to be
224 certified. You know, there are... there's also an attitude here at UD. We have twenty percent of
225 our freshman students that are homeschooled. And don't get me wrong, I think homeschooling
226 is ideal for some families, and it works very well for some families. Other families, maybe not
227 so much. But I will tell you this much: there is a disdain for education majors on this campus
228 and for education courses, and that's been like that since I arrived. It's almost as if there is...

229 anybody can teach.

230 **TR:** Which they can't.

231 **BK:** Why do they have to take education courses? What's the point of them? You know, you
232 can kind of learn on the job. And I will say to you that I have spent hours discerning that
233 question, and I will say that the answer for me is this. If you want to be a good teacher, yes,
234 education courses are valuable, but it's not so much the content of our courses that is the value in
235 majoring in education or interdisciplinary studies. The value is taking two years out of your life
236 and seriously reflecting and discerning on what it means to teach. Teaching is different from
237 learning. Because if you do not think about that, and you walk into a classroom, you want to
238 teach the way you learn, and that doesn't work for all children.

239 **TR:** That makes sense.

240 **BK:** So I think it's about time. It's about spending time reflecting on what it means to teach, and
241 you can't... you just can't do it when you're knee-deep in English or history or something like
242 that. You have to be knee-deep in history and thinking about what does it mean to teach history.
243 It's very different.

244 **TR:** Got it. Okay, cool. So the next one is, in an ideal world, how do you think education
245 should be run in terms of standardized testing, government and parent involvement, and
246 curriculum?

247 **BK:** I've already got this figured out.

248 **TR:** Okay.

249 **BK:** Okay, first of all, I think we give too many tests.

250 **TR:** Okay.

251 **BK:** Yep. Plain and simple. In a day and an age when we have technology, there is no reason in

252 the world that the SAT, the STAAR test, the ACT, all of them couldn't be blended into one test,
253 and if we wanted a high school graduation based on testing, pull specific items out and let those
254 count as the high school graduation piece. Other items could be more for college potential.
255 You'd evaluate that group of items. You could do... you could do this in a very different way
256 without giving kids a million tests, but this is big business, and I'm well aware of that. So I
257 would reduce the numbers of tests. Secondly, I would dramatically change the way we are
258 administering tests. That's where all the high stakes is. Covering up windows and bulletin
259 boards, and creating sterile environments for children, you know, because we're so fearful that
260 not every child is going to be given equal treatment is just plain not realistic. We learn in a
261 context. We learn in both a social context and we learn in environments. Let's let it be normal.

262 **TR:** Okay.

263 **BK:** That's what I would say. Oh, as far as grades, I would abandon grades and just use the test.
264 Why not?

265 **TR:** Abandon grades?

266 **BK:** Sure. Why not? And just have teachers leave – you know, give feedback on how well
267 students are mastering the things that they need in order to get into college or whatever it is
268 they're going to do.

269 **TR:** And to what level, or all the way through, would you abandon grades?

270 **BK:** I don't really think we need them for anybody.

271 **TR:** For even college?

272 **BK:** Yeah. And I've talked to my husband about this, and he almost had a heart failure. You
273 know my husband's a lawyer. He said, how would we know which students to hire? Because
274 we wouldn't have GPAs to go by. I said, don't you think it's time that you got to know the

275 people that you're hiring instead of just looking at some transcript? So I would... I think I would
276 rather read some paragraphs about students than the grades. I'm not sure grades are...

277 **TR:** Alright, well, that's an interesting idea. What about government involvement in school?
278 Like to what extent do you think that that should be a thing?

279 **BK:** Well, you know we're at the cusp of a national curriculum for the states.

280 **TR:** Right.

281 **BK:** Texas is only one of five states that has not adopted the core curriculum, whatever it's
282 called.

283 **TR:** The Common Core?

284 **BK:** The Common Core. And, you know, I'm okay with the Common Core. I'm okay with the
285 TEKS. I'm okay with any of the standards. First of all, teachers are not equipped to always
286 necessarily know exactly what they need to be teaching. It's nice to have a guideline.

287 **TR:** Yeah.

288 **BK:** You know, when I first started teaching, those guidelines were textbooks. We needed them
289 because there were no standardized tests. The tests didn't start until much after I started
290 teaching. But I do think that, um... I don't know, I just think that we need to kind of cut back on
291 some of this testing stuff. I'm just kind of concerned about it.

292 **TR:** Yeah, for sure. Um, and then – that kind of covers curriculum, too – what do you think of
293 parent involvement? Like how involved do you think parents should be?

294 **BK:** Parent involvement has changed dramatically. It used to be that, you know, PTA meetings
295 were overrun by parents, and that's changing. I think in part that has to do with the fact that
296 there... that people are so much busier these days. I think part of it may be the fact that women
297 have entered the workforce in such strong numbers, and they are, you know, as busy as men, and

298 so the family structure has changed. And I don't think teachers have the same... they don't have
299 the same pulling power or authority in the lives of children that they once had. And I would
300 attribute that to our very litigious society, the fact that parents, you know, they started taking
301 schools to court over hair lengths, over dress codes, until eventually, teachers... I've created a
302 little word; it's called "prevent-teach." It's what I think a lot of teachers in the classrooms do to
303 keep from being sued by parents. So they prevent-teach rather than teach because if you're
304 teaching, you can't be – I mean, I've never been sued by a parent before, and I don't anticipate
305 that I will, but I don't want to teach in fear of being sued all the time, because of the way that
306 I'm, you know, interacting with a child, and I think a lot of teachers are fearful of that.

307 **TR:** Interesting. Okay, cool. Um, my next question, and this is the second to last one, what do
308 you predict to be the future of education in America?

309 **BK:** Oh gosh, that's a very good question. I'm a little worried about our traditional public
310 schools. I, um... you know, with all the vouchers and voucher education, I don't know if we will
311 eventually move to a system that is much more driven by technology, so curriculum and
312 textbooks, they're already on the internet now. Teachers will become more and more – and I
313 hate the word "facilitator," but in a way, the teachers are going to become more facilitators to
314 something else that's going on in the curriculum. So education in America I think is going to
315 become... it is going to become differentiated to the extent that wealthier families and families
316 that have a stake in the game or who are having a legacy of education in their families are going
317 to be the ones that rise to the education system, and the impoverished families and the families
318 that don't have a legacy of education are going to be left behind.

319 **TR:** Interesting.

320 **BK:** That's kind of what I think. At least for a while.

321 **TR:** Do you have any comments on that question, like with regards to differences between
322 elementary education and college level or high school level? Do you think there might be some
323 variety in the changes coming for any of the different levels?

324 **BK:** Yes, I do. You know, I don't know if anybody will listen to me, but I do think elementary
325 children, elementary education, will remain a face-to-face, hands-on environment because that is
326 the nature of the young child. I think that we will eventually move to a more technology-driven
327 system for older kids.

328 **TR:** I can see that.

329 **BK:** I see it as being more online courses with teachers available to help students who need the
330 help as they move – as they go forward. And I say that having developed my own courses with
331 the idea of having companion websites, with the idea of guiding my students and then helping
332 them where it's needed. Very Vygotskian. I think that's where we're headed.

333 **TR:** Interesting.

334 **BK:** That's – exactly. So I think high school will be more like that. I think elementary will
335 remain much more face-to-face and more hands-on.

336 **TR:** Got it. And then the last question is pretty broad. Is there anything else you might like to
337 add?

338 **BK:** I don't want people to think that I'm not hopeful about the future.

339 **TR:** Okay.

340 **BK:** Okay, and I'll tell you why. Maybe I do, in fact, live in a bubble here at UD. But the young
341 people that I work with on a daily basis give me great hope for the future because I feel that
342 whatever the issues are that are out there, you all have the talent to solve the problems.

343 **TR:** Thank you.

344 **BK:** Okay?

345 **TR:** Thank you very much for your time.

346 **BK:** You are welcome, young lady.