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

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

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

6 **Debra Baldwin:** Yes.

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

9 **DB:** Well, I think I went to a very short, uh, brief, pre-school program for a couple of days a
10 week before kindergarten. I remember it very dimly. I remember going on a little bus and I also
11 remember wearing my favorite green corduroy jacket. And I remember we were doing finger
12 painting, and I remember a little boy licked his finger painting and then licked my jacket and got
13 yellow paint on it. This was pretty much my only memory of this preschool program which was
14 private and, as I say, just a short time period in my life. Then I went to kindergarten in Toronto,
15 Ontario, Canada. It was half day kindergarten (at that time, kindergarten was only half-day).
16 Then I went, continued on, to elementary school for two grades, one and two... umm... at which
17 point I was transferred into an advancement program through the public school. So I went to
18 another school that I was bused to, but I did grades three and four together and I stayed with that
19 cohort of students through the end of grade eight. So I was bused to an elementary school until
20 grade six, uh, until grade six, at which point I went to a middle school with the same cohort. It
21 was all bused. Then after that, I went to a regular, local, public high school. In Canada at that
22 time, high school was five years long: we had grade thirteen. Grade thirteen persisted until, oh,

23 sometime in the 1990's, I think—maybe the 1980's when they were under pressure to conform to
24 the American model, um, and switched it to a four-year high school. After that, I went to the
25 University of Toronto for four years and I got a double major in Political Science and
26 Philosophy. And then it was a large—let's see—was the University of Toronto “public” or
27 “private”? I don't think, there wasn't really that distinction as much. I don't know that there are
28 state schools in Canada – or maybe they *all* are. I think that it [the University of Toronto] is
29 something somewhat more akin to a state-like school than ,say, McGill University, which
30 seemed to be—in my imagination—more private. It [the University of Toronto] seemed to be
31 [less private]. Nevertheless, it was my local university. As a Canadian, I never felt that same
32 [thing that] I thought of as an American experience of “going away” to college. Some kids did it,
33 but I knew where my grand piano and my car were [chuckles], and my dog, and I didn't want to
34 leave them. So I was a commuter. And after that, I went to a graduate school at the University
35 of Chicago, where I got my M.A. and my Ph.D. from the Committee on Social Thought. I stayed
36 in Chicago for ten years, completing all of that program, and during the time I also worked in
37 their Adult Education Great Books program, which I loved very much... umm... and I guess that
38 is the end. That brought me to my Ph.D., which is my most recent degree.

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

42 **DB:** Well I have very, very, very positive experiences of all the schools I have attended. I have
43 always loved school and I have always loved the schools I have been at. My experiences in
44 kindergarten, one, and two, involved great affection for the teachers I had at the time. I only had
45 one teacher during the day for each grade and I remember just the variety of activities – doing a

46 lot of writing stories and just feeling very, very challenged in a good way. I also remember the
47 process of being chosen to go to the advancement classes. They had a trailer or something set up.
48 It was like a big bus, and I remember going into the trailer, being pulled out of class, and going
49 into the trailer, and being given a barrage of puzzles and tests and interviews. And I was very
50 excited about it. I remember the first thing they said to me was, “Oh look, the previous boy that
51 was here made a mess on the floor here!” (maybe like match sticks, something dangerous) and I
52 remember thinking to myself, “that is such a set-up, there is no way they just let him leave it,
53 they obviously planted it for me” [giggles] So there was some manipulation. I also remember
54 getting speech therapy. I had a lisp. I couldn’t do my r’s and I remember going to speech
55 therapy and playing Concentration with cards that all had r’s on them – which I’m pretty sure
56 they still do with kids. It was fun. I loved being taken out of class. I don’t remember very many
57 extracurricular activities besides playing the piano. I didn’t do sports other than playing myself
58 and with my friend over at the school sometimes. When I went to Sunnylea [Elementary School],
59 which was the school that was the advancement classes, things changed somewhat because I was
60 bused to school. And I felt very special – and the cohort of students there was very, very close.
61 To this day, we have a Facebook page for that group. My oldest friend, I consider to be my
62 oldest friend, is someone I met in grade three. I don’t remember the extracurricular activities,
63 although I do remember field trips like going orienteering. What I remember is just all sorts of
64 exciting opportunities. One of the Language Arts teachers, who actually went to go on to become
65 a Jungian therapist, was involved in these. I don’t know if you are familiar with – I don’t know
66 if the educational background include – these activities, but they involve small groups discussing
67 moral conundrums: “If six people are in a boat – here is their profile – how would you decide
68 who gets saved and who doesn’t?” I remember she had us do those things, and she also had us do

69 journaling, and she also had us do *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and she also had us do a project on
70 *The Chronicles of Narnia*. I got to pick the topic in which, um, I was able to explore the texts on
71 levels I had never considered before, on the allegorical and literal level. And I also remember she
72 brought in a speaker who described the politics of fairytales—how “Ring Around the Rosie” was
73 actually written during the plague, and “Mary, Mary Quite Contrary” was about Mary Queen of
74 Scots—all of these underlying political realities of those things. And those experiences I
75 remember feeling that my college education picked up on once again. It was the reason I went
76 into political philosophy, in part, was this curiosity about the political context of fairytales. And
77 that project on *The Chronicles of Narnia*, made me excited about literary texts and the layers of
78 literary text. So all of that was an astonishing experience, really—the opportunities that that
79 program gave me. When I went to high school, I remember I was very full of myself because I
80 had been with these, been with these smart kids (and many of them have gone on to do great
81 things). One of them is a pediatrician in California and has worked on amazing child advocacy
82 things. One of them became a tennis player at Wimbledon and now teaches tennis. It’s a
83 remarkable little group. And I remember thinking—I didn’t know that at the time, but I
84 suspected—that it all felt very special. And I think there are negative things to an experience
85 like that. I remember when I went to high school, a regular high school, I just figured I was going
86 to be some sort of genius because I hadn’t interacted with regular students. And I remember after
87 the first report card and I got, I guess, a couple of grades in the 80’s (I didn’t work particularly
88 hard, because I was someone for that things came easy, so my work ethic was notoriously bad)
89 and I remember the girl behind me asking what I got, and I showed her my grades and she should
90 me her grades and they were all in the 90’s, the higher 90’s. I was just, remember feeling, “Huh?
91 Oh my goodness! Here was someone that went to regular school and she is getting higher grades

92 than me!” And so for me, high school was a very integrative process for me, where I realized I
93 was a regular, normal person like everybody else, and I had to work hard, like everybody else—
94 that some things I was good at, naturally, and other things I had to work harder for. And I got
95 very involved in activities. I want to add something about assessments. We did not get graded
96 until grade six, and we only got comments. And I have every one of my report cards. There were
97 little boxes – I guess they started with about ten boxes in kindergarten and they gradually
98 multiplied all of these boxes for all of these criteria of assessment—and each box got a sentence.
99 I remember very clearly – usually my report cards were good – but I remember one box, under
100 language arts, said: “Debbie is very long-winded” [chuckles] and I have often thought back to
101 the perspicacity to that comment and its, uh, prophetic quality, landing me in a place where I *can*
102 be long-winded. But this notion of *comments*, the value of those comments, so many of them,
103 not just that one that was funny, but other ones that encouraged me, encouraged my strengths,
104 praised my imagination, praised my perseverance, praised my ability to organize—those
105 articulations of what was allowing me to succeed—were very helpful to me. And in fact, my
106 sister credits her going on into medicine to a comment she received, praising her leadership
107 qualities, that stuck with her, her whole life. I say this because the single biggest difference I
108 notice in my education and my children’s education now is the movement away from the power
109 of the sentence—the descriptive sentence. The power to articulate what is going on, what is
110 succeeding or what might not be succeeding in the actions of an individual child. Numbers were
111 a shock to me in grade six, I don’t really remember what grades I got. I think they were both a
112 shock—in the lack of the ability to describe and their novelty—in this strange way that they were
113 suddenly evaluating on a single scale that which I naturally had come to appreciate as not being
114 on a single scale. And I think that ability to receive evaluation as a descriptive flourishing, a

115 description of flourishing, rather than ranking, has informed my understanding of education ever
116 since, and I lament the decline of that way of evaluating.

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

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

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

129 **DB:** Well, there are many levels to take to consider that question. One is on the micro level and
130 another is on the macro level. On the micro level, I am struck by certain similarities between—
131 and continuities between—my education and the education of my children, that they are
132 receiving in the Irving Independent School district (they both attend public school). Kids are
133 kids. Education is largely social, as well as academic or intellectual, and I am struck by the
134 enduring dreams of elementary and middle school and the enduring curiosity of kids to read, to
135 read certain series. For me it was *Narnia* and *Nancy Drew*, and these various detective [stories]
136 – I guess the *Encyclopedia Brown* I loved – my daughter loves *Wings of Fire* – and my kids have

137 gone through certain series they love, and it's wonderful to see that continuity. I am struck by the
138 different evaluation, the different means of evaluation. I am struck by the difference. The
139 continuity is the difference an individual teacher can make. We have had some good teachers
140 with my kids and some not so good teachers. And a bad teacher – for example, my son's grade
141 seven geometry teacher – was a catastrophe. And my son, who is actually a year ahead now in
142 math (he is grade ten, but is taking calculus in grade eleven and has scored highly on the pre-
143 SAT) he is someone that ought to have loved his math classes because he is gifted at math. Yet,
144 he had one teacher who so alienated him and so caused him—I hate to blame, so let me pull back
145 for a second: her classroom created the conditions in which he did poorly because the
146 expectations and the teaching itself were so negative and even incompetent. So the power of an
147 individual teacher! I don't think I had a teacher quite that bad. I remember having a teacher that
148 yelled at everybody and created a very fearful environment which just kind of dried up the
149 learning as I experienced it. Uh, differences: We heard the Lord's Prayer every morning. This
150 was a public school and the year after I left high school, they changed it to a moment of silence.
151 I say that for the record, not for any particular advocacy or opposition. I still correspond with a
152 Muslim girl whom I remember in grade eight always stepped outside the class while we said the
153 Lord's Prayer every morning. And I asked her—we sort of felt badly about it, as a group, later,
154 years later, on Facebook, we were like, "Sonya, what was that like?" You know, we felt so badly
155 that she had to step outside. And she didn't mind it at all! She said she was fine with it and it
156 sort of made her – I don't want to quote her exactly, but something to the affect that – it made
157 her feel special and it wasn't this big trauma that we thought it might be. Now fundamentally for
158 me, especially high school and maybe elementary school was a very integrative experience. I got
159 to be with all sorts of kids and I really enjoyed that. And this is also what my own kids are

160 experiencing right now as well. They have a variety of friends from a variety of backgrounds,
161 some rich, some poor, some English (ESL), some English, you know native language, and that is
162 a really wonderful thing. I don't know if I am answering your question. I am kind of long
163 winded aren't I?

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

167 **DB:** My middle school experience or upper elementary and middle school experience was very
168 similar to the Montessori-influenced teaching that I see going on right now in the public schools.
169 I should add, my kids went to a Montessori school before they went to a public school. This was
170 a decision we made in part because my son had attended Mother's Day Out programs by the
171 local churches before kindergarten because we didn't need full blown day care, but we needed a
172 little bit of childcare and the Mother's Day Out programs fulfilled that need perfectly for us. And
173 then that, in that context, there was a lot of fear and prejudice against the public-school system.
174 We had just moved here from Philadelphia, and before that Chicago, and before that Toronto. As
175 a Canadian, the thought of going to private school was the weirdest thing the world. There were
176 some Catholics that went and we could never understand why they did that. It just seemed like
177 such a way to compartmentalize yourself away. And I thought the uniforms were ridiculous and
178 also very improper. I mean, the Catholic girls would hike up their skirts in a way that I found sort
179 of licentious. I know that sounds funny, but I actually thought that Catholic school girls were
180 kind of loose and somehow, in my public school, I was more proper. I'm just saying that for the
181 record; it was its own type of prejudice. So, then I came here and I heard all this prejudice – "Oh,
182 my gosh, you can't go to the public school! There will be drugs and all these terrible things and

183 besides, you have this little brilliant child, and Marshall was our little sort of... he was a – what’s
184 the word I’m looking for... I don’t want to say he is a prodigy, that just sounds too inflated – he
185 was a smart cookie. And it felt to us, as older parents, not even knowing if we would ever have
186 another child, that we needed to give him the absolute best. So, as a result, Montessori just
187 seemed like a perfect fit. And indeed it was, because Montessori allows the child, especially in
188 early years, to be very self-motivated. And Marshall, our son, is the world’s lowest maintenance
189 child ever. I mean, he has just always kind of been that way. You wind him up and let him go.
190 He just does what he is supposed to do. So, he flourished extraordinarily well, and then, when we
191 had our daughter, who is the yin to his yang, not because she is not clever, but because she has
192 all sorts of interesting learning needs. She had speech problems. She had some sorts of delays,
193 She also had a mind that seemed to approach things in a way simultaneously from different
194 angles which made all the practical skills of Montessori very difficult for her. And she had
195 orthopedic problems as well. So and we just suddenly saw that Montessori was doing nothing for
196 her at all and the teachers were unable to describe even how she was different—and, more
197 importantly, what was wonderful about her... right?... which is sort of the, surely the key to
198 every good teacher is to see each student individually and notice what is wonderful about that
199 student and therefore what that student needs in order to learn. I don’t know that I do that myself,
200 but I recognize what I *should* be doing... and Montessori was failing our daughter horribly.
201 Meanwhile, the Irving Independent School district was giving her speech therapy even though
202 she wasn’t part of the school system class-wise. And we discovered this huge treasure of
203 competent, descriptive support. She got all sorts of testing. She got a therapist being able to
204 describe what she needed. So, we decided. And meanwhile Marshall, who had gone up to grade
205 five in Montessori, was discovering that Montessori, while it is great for kindergarten and early-

206 elementary school students, at a certain point our experience was, that it gets utterly by rote and
207 boring. They have to do these “works,” which consist of copying things out from a card. The
208 most boring and the self-driven activities end up being very constraining and uninteresting. So
209 we transferred both kids into the public-school system. Marshall went into grade six and Clara
210 went into kindergarten and she ended up repeating her kindergarten year she had done at
211 Montessori, which had actually turned out to be a good thing. And we were much, much, much
212 happier there. So, I’m not sure where this has led in terms of the differences from Canada. I
213 believe, I myself was able to get accommodation for giftedness in my experience and what I
214 have seen is exactly the same sort of flexibility and accommodation in the public school now. As
215 I mentioned, my son was a grade ahead in math. In grade eight, the school bused him to the high
216 school so that he could take a grade nine class in the morning, which I thought was an
217 extraordinary accommodation which also set him back on track to love math again, after his
218 disaster in grade seven. Our daughter continues to get special support for her various problems,
219 her challenges, and we have really loved a lot of the teachers and principals we have worked
220 with. And so, I tend to find very much similarity between the two public school systems.

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

224 **DB:** Well, it is hard to know what my particular sampling tells. My teaching began with adult
225 students in Chicago who were all educated, driven, and interested in the great books, as a cultural
226 group, an intrinsic good. [They were] brilliant, brilliant students who gave me a completely false
227 sense of what teaching was. Because I could walk in and go “Nu?” and they would all start
228 talking at a very high level! So, that was an education for me. It was a wonderful thing and I

229 don't know if or how we can tap into and encourage people to turn into those people for our
230 generation. Then I taught at Villanova and I taught a course in their Core Humanities Program
231 and also some honors courses. I taught there for five years and I have taught here at the
232 University of Dallas for almost seventeen years. So in those years of teaching undergraduates,
233 the most significant change I have noticed is simply punctuation (chuckles). I do think that
234 students now are grammatically challenged in a way that they just weren't when I was either
235 growing up or first teaching. There have just always been minor issues with subject-verb
236 agreement and commas and semicolons, but never quite on the scale that I regularly see now. Is
237 that a substantive difference is that a crucial decline? I'm not convinced that it is. I think of it as
238 a formal challenge that I think it's worth figuring out how to address, but I don't think – I don't
239 see as – a substantive difference.

240 I do feel another change is that students are more pressured in their college. This is my
241 perception: that they are more pressured to think about their careers. And they don't accept –
242 they don't accept as easily – the gift of undergraduate education as the deepest and most
243 wonderful time of leisure where they can deepen themselves as human beings. When I went to
244 university (and in Canada we called it “university,” not “college”), “college” was something that
245 one was meant to go to for vocational training. But to go to university was to get an education
246 and not to be trained for a career—to be educated, to learn about the great human questions. To
247 be educated was to learn another language. To be educated was to know something about Latin.
248 To be educated was to be able to speak with a broad and deep wisdom and to be aware of all the
249 cultural ideas that shape civilization and that was an ideal that I felt very strongly. Personally, it
250 was an ideal conveyed by my family. It was an ideal my grandparents didn't have [the
251 opportunity to enjoy]. They came from small villages in the Ukraine, but they looked up to

252 learning and the sanctity of learning as something very important. So, it was actually never a
253 question for me whether or not I would go to University. That was the ideal that I aspired to.
254 Now, what I would do after University – whether I would become a doctor or a lawyer, because
255 that were my only two options growing up, right? (chuckles) – you know, you got your choice,
256 either a doctor or a lawyer – that was not an issue. And the idea of graduate school was very
257 new to me, you know. I would go on to graduate school in what I thought would be Philosophy
258 but turned out to be Literature. But that was something that I had to sort of come to on my own.
259 I don't know if students now have that same confidence in going to University and I don't know
260 if the University is sufficiently holding up that ideal, that beautiful vision, with enough
261 confidence. Because the fact is, once you have that, then the practical things will follow. You
262 will have the other skills that allow you to succeed. You will have the ability to communicate
263 that will allow a company to hire you, or that will allow you to find your own company. But it's
264 having the confidence growing as a human being and having an intellect that counts—that
265 doesn't just “get grades,” but that enters into the human conversation.

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

267 **DB:** Well, as I said, for me growing up, private school was a strangeness. I realized there were
268 certain people who sent their kids to Catholic school, perhaps for religious reasons. I realized
269 that there were other people who sent their children to prep-like, upper class private schools like
270 Branksome Hall in Toronto, schools for the very wealthy. And this was very comical to me
271 because I knew that I was going to go to University and *that* would level those economic
272 differences. So, I just thought that both of those options were funny strangenesses. The thought
273 that that would actually be a real option for me would have never crossed my mind. I didn't
274 know I was ever going to move to Texas, either. But the thought of the culturally private school

275 as being a respectable option at the pre-college level? Colleges are a little bit different because
276 colleges have always been a place of quirkier paths, not the shared education – the necessarily
277 shared education – for all. College was the thing that not everyone necessarily wanted to go to,
278 or would go to in the same way, so “private” *there* didn’t seem to be strange. But high school
279 and lower? That, that, *that’s* the education of the country. That’s the education of the whole
280 culture. And the idea that there would be a private element to *that* as a mainstream option was
281 very strange to me – and remains strange to me. The idea that you could have homeschooling, is
282 so far beyond the pale, so far off the scales of what seems strange to me (seemed and seems
283 strange to me) that it is hard to quite figure out how a parent could make that choice. I believe
284 that parenting by definition is “homeschooling.” Every parent reads and works with the
285 intellectual development of his or her child. But that is a far cry from something else that
286 children need, which is to be part of their community and their country. And also, to see what is
287 going on outside of the family, that is one of the hardest things to see growing up: to see that
288 your family is not every family (chuckles). I remember working as a nanny one summer and
289 noticing the different habits in this other family, and how astonished I was that this other family
290 had a completely different culture. And I’m not talking about nationality or some different type
291 of food. I’m talking about dynamic. We just had a very different family dynamic and that
292 illumination of experiencing another family – with different assumptions about how to act and
293 how to think – was just mind blowing for me. And that is a part of what all education must be.

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

295 **DB:** I’m not the one to ask for predictions, I don’t know if a single prediction I’ve ever made
296 politically has come to pass except in the most general and uninteresting and unhelpful way. So I
297 can’t predict what will happen. I do worry, however, about the increasing balkanization of

298 education. I worry that people will retreat into little circles that cannot talk to one another—and
299 worse, because they don't have experience of other circles—caricature and fear the other circles.
300 I think that this trend makes us smaller as people and as a nation and it saddens me very much.
301 So my fear is increasing balkanization. But my hope is that there are a lot of smart people out
302 there that surly recognize this. There are surely smart people out there that know that although a
303 few excellent parents can give their children perhaps an excellent homeschool education, that
304 that example means that there are a lot of less excellent (or perhaps even dangerous) people who
305 could have the same idea with their own children—and that the larger picture is not a good one.
306 So if enough thoughtful people can realize the larger implications of balkanization, then I think
307 we can all talk and perhaps arrive at some compromise. One such compromise is, I understand,
308 that the Irving School District does allow some integration of part of homeschooling for some
309 children. I'm not sure what the details of this are, but it seems to me that the public-school
310 system does have some accommodation for students whose parents want them to be
311 homeschooled in certain subjects. I don't know exactly how that works, but I believe that can
312 happen. I think there can be all sorts of initiatives that develop a shared understanding. I do think
313 that it is crucial for the survival of our culture, that we can all talk to one another and that our
314 education must be integrative as well as excellence driven.

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

317 **DB:** Hmm. Only that the enduring human spirit gives me hope. That sounds like a cliché, but I
318 mean it sincerely. One can't work around children without being in complete awe at their joy,
319 their uniqueness, their curiosity. And as long as there are children, there is hope. And I think
320 that, I do wish that more people had had the experience of— (phone rings with a “drumbeat”

321 tone) That's a really funny soundtrack... I should tell the tape recorder, the iPad: that's my
322 telephone, not an ominous (chuckles) incoming call... there we go! It's going to voicemail.
323 (chuckles)—I wish more people could experience the positive experiences that I have had with
324 public school education because I believe that public school is one of the greatest contributions
325 that this country has given to our world and that public school makes possible the very process of
326 democracy. And I hope, I hope, that there will be strong voices who can articulate the case for
327 public school in our future.

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