

## Toward Self-Reliance: Reflections on the State of Our Educational System

**Héctor Magaña**  
*Universidad Andrés Bello*

hmagana@unab.cl

### Abstract

This essay addresses the Chilean student movement and educational system in terms of the changes the former demands be made regarding the latter. Based on the main tenets of American Transcendentalism, the essay suggests a roadmap to be followed before superficial changes are made. Some ideas by Gandhi, Thoreau, and Emerson are explored and explained to present the foundations upon which a reformulation of Chilean education can be constructed. The essay ultimately calls for reflexivity and responsibility to be the turning points in the changes that the system requires.

**Keywords:** Chilean educational system, Transcendentalism, educational reform

There is no doubt that these are times of change. Paradigms that for years served to explain various phenomena have begun to fall into disrepute. Globally, people are increasingly expressing their discontent with political decisions, economic conditions, unfair policies, social injustice, and an array of other issues—ranging from ecological causes to educational policies. Social protests are based on the most fundamental of all democratic principles: freedom of speech. I, like many others who commend active participation in civil life, rejoice at seeing people from different backgrounds taking steps toward the changes they deem necessary in order to terminate the problems that afflict them. Indeed, in my role as an educator of future educators, I strive to foster an inquisitive and challenging mental attitude in my students. In my formative years, I was fortunate to be trained by some of the most outstanding minds of the time, most of whom went out of their way to instigate the development of a curious and probing mind in me and my classmates. Questioning assumed truths is an essential part, I believe, of our educational system at all levels. It is only in the juxtaposition of diverse ideas and contrasting views that democracy is exercised in its purest form.

For many years, I have witnessed this inquisitive trait, essential to all types of learning (professional, skill-based, pre-service, in-service, scholastic, etc.), gradually playing second fiddle to the more immediate demands that the liberalization of markets around the world have imposed on our lives. At the same time, the new millennium has brought about a fresh sense of

anger and dissatisfaction that has resonated with the younger generations. The protests that overthrew abusive governments in the Middle East, the upset civilians protesting unemployment and ineffective governmental policies in Madrid, the Occupy Wall Street movement, and the student movement in our country are but some symptoms of a larger underlying dissatisfaction that has been brewing for years—in some cases, decades—and which, like a pressure cooker, threatens to reach a saturation level that may only be relieved by letting steam out. The build-up of energy could eventually lead to necessary, long-anticipated changes. As Gandhi (1999) once said, “If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him” (p. 241). I read Gandhi’s remarks to mean that being an agent of transformation is ultimately an essential aspect of a man’s life. Individual transformation is fundamental for a person’s integral development. Different spiritual movements around the world target individual transformation as the main goal for their followers. Religions often develop exercises, practices, and even rituals that are aimed at enabling the elevation of the human spirits to its highest potential. Gandhi’s idea of peaceful non-conformity was based on his belief that, by opposing the British Empire without resorting to violence, Indians would be acting upon their own dreams and wishes, thus achieving the goals that they had set out for their nation and following what their instinct told them was right. Despite the criticism and the questioning that his methods and outcomes have received in recent years, I think his ideological foundations are sound and evident.

Gandhi’s non-violent civil disobedience was significantly influenced by the works of American transcendentalist authors, like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. The latter was an important source of inspiration: Gandhi is said to have read Thoreau’s “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience” many times in his lifetime. Evidently, many of Thoreau’s ideas have also influenced other humanist thinkers through the simplicity of statements that, nonetheless, contain profound implications. For example, when Thoreau (1985) asks for a better type of government that responds to the needs of the people that elected it, he also underlines the importance of individual action: “Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it” (p. 685). This claim is not just a call for effective participation by each member of society, but it is also a reflection on the ultimate role of a government. As institutions elected by people who trust them with the future of their nations, governments (and, consequently, States), are, in theory, bound by ethical principles to serve their people, not the partisan interests that incorrectly sustain and drive them. By identifying and defining the type of government they aspire to establish, people must reflect on the role of that institution, its validity in terms of representation, and the efficacy that it should have. This analytical participation in civil society effectively allows people to exercise democracy.

Democracy is often said to be realized in the act of voting. Thoreau’s ideas explain the significance of voting as a democratic act yet, simultaneously, emphasize the futility of voting as a passive delegation of responsibilities:

All voting is a sort of gaming, like checkers or backgammon, with a slight moral tinge to it, a playing with right and wrong, with moral questions; and betting naturally accompanies it. The character of the voters is not staked. I cast my vote, perchance, as I think right; but I am not vitally concerned that that right should prevail. I am willing to leave it to the majority. Its obligation, therefore, never exceeds that of expediency. Even voting *for the right* is doing *nothing* for it. It is only expressing to men feebly your desire that it should prevail. (p. 688)

I believe that what has not functioned for quite some time is, perhaps, the practice of thoughtless democratic acts. It may be that our culture has been concerned for too long with the constraints of our modern lives and we have been too hard-pressed to focus on the consequences of our obvious passivity when it comes to voicing out our ideals. The resulting disinterest in civic affairs has translated into an almost total disregard for the type of genuine analysis that is expected of all citizens. Thoreau was aware of what a grave problem civic meekness was, and he warned us about it: “A wise man will not leave the right to the mercy of chance, nor wish it to prevail through the power of the majority. There is but little virtue in the action of masses of men” (p. 688). Unfortunately, for many years our culture has relied on the voice of the majority based on the fallacy that it is the largest act of democratic exchange. I do not believe it is; that is why I celebrate the reactionary movements that have arisen in the last few years, which oppose the decisions made by the allegedly democratic majorities and their representatives. Those reactionary movements furnish proof that there are people who are still willing to think outside the box—despite the fact that they are often regarded as minorities—and look at systems, policies, and institutions with suspicion and a probing attitude. Most significantly, those movements have been started by individuals who have shared their views with other individuals who had similar ideas, thus creating an outlet for the views they had developed on their own.

As welcomed as acts of non-conformity are, however, it is always wise to stop to analyze those acts as well. Being able to reflect on any given matter and draw conclusions based on our reflections is an ability that must be treasured and, indeed, stimulated from the very early stages of formal learning discussed earlier. Nonetheless, reflecting on our knowledge, on how we understand and use knowledge, and on the types of knowledge that are accessible to us is fundamental. This type of knowledge cannot be found in books; it is not an ability that can be acquired by means of problem-solving drills that stimulate certain parts of the brain. Our ability to reflect on how much we participate in civic affairs is directly related to our ethos. It can be heard by listening intently to our inner voice. Emerson (1985a) addressed this rather crucial issue when he said, “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,—that is genius” (p. 495). Far from being a cry for egocentrism, Emerson’s statement emphasizes the importance of searching for truth in oneself. He goes on to explain how children, in their innocence, are closely connected to their instincts, which are devoid of prejudice and corruption, and thus act upon what their hearts demand. This statement is not an apology for infantile behavior nor does it invite us to throw tantrums when we do not get

our way or every time a decision needs to be made. Emerson (1985a) simply compares the soul of a child with the kind of purity that resides in everybody's soul after eliminating selfishness, consumerism, and the power-driven demands of our modern societies. He points out that there are voices that we should listen to, but these voices "grow faint and inaudible as we enter the world" (p. 497). Notwithstanding the fading resonance of those voices, they are there. We simply must remember not to ignore them. Many answers to our daily tribulations can be found in ourselves by paying attention to what those voices say. Those voices alluded to by Emerson are simply what some schools of thought call the voice of conscience. Call it what you may. That internal calling is what drives us to be aware of acts that may inflict harm on others and pushes us to find satisfaction in doing what we know benefits us and others. I think that the search for the well-being of one's community should be the ultimate goal of any social organization. Therefore, I believe that all actions driven by our child-like instincts, in their purest forms, tend to the common good and should, therefore, be recognized as such.

Emerson (1985a), however, places special emphasis on individual thinking, not on collective decisions. He claims that

[w]hat I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is the harder, because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude. (p. 498)

Emerson's (1985b) warning is fundamental for our understanding of "Man Thinking" (p. 473) as he himself defines it. "Man Thinking" is a term coined by Emerson in "The American Scholar" to describe the essence of learned people. The term is used to make a distinction between scholastic intellectuals that merely repeat the knowledge contained in books, whereas "Man Thinking" is the intellectual who puts knowledge into practice with his actions. In a larger context, "Man Thinking" is not only a classically trained individual, but all men willing to make use of their true potentials. At the very core of our analytical ability is the need for all men to free themselves from the bindings of peer pressure and rigid social structures that blind them. From this perspective, society can negatively influence and restrict the individual by imposing truths that are not questioned and, worse of all, are transmitted from one generation to the next. Yet, by allowing ourselves to act independently and driven by our inner motivations, we take action to eradicate the imposition of social fallacies in our culture. Self-reliance entails trusting our own capabilities and judgment, as well as creating the conditions for needed changes. I believe that using our intellectual capabilities to resolve issues along with effectively listening to what our instinct reveals can guide our decision-making processes when exercising democracy.

It is not easy to fight the comfort of being only one more in the crowd. Fear, laziness, and lack of information are powerful factors that can restrain people from accomplishing more than what they have been told they can achieve. However, I am convinced that everyone is capable of maximizing their potentials. As Emerson (1985a) concludes in his essay, “Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles” (p. 511). These words include a fundamental message for people willing to assume a non-conformist attitude: we can only be honest with ourselves by putting into practice that which we hold to be beneficial for ourselves and our communities. Being honest with others is an ethical commitment of living in social groups, but being honest with ourselves is essential for our own contentment and integrity. In other words, doing what we believe is right is an act of self-preservation.

Thoreau’s and Emerson’s transcendentalist ideas are certainly applicable to the current state of our educational system. The students’ revolution that began in 2006 epitomizes to a large degree the ideas of non-conformity. It sprang from the discontent and frustration that students enrolled in public school accumulated over years of segregation, poor academic results, and the consequent eradication of opportunities for future social advancement. Students organized themselves horizontally in a non-traditional system of representation that challenged the expectations of the authorities. This new form of organization may be the reason why the movement, despite the hardships it has faced over seven years, is still active and trying to regain some of the vocal space they had conquered from the beginning. As a student movement, it certainly is promising and admirable in that their representatives have refused to let other entities dominate them for political benefit. Together with their accomplishments, I think this movement also provides a unique opportunity to reflect not just on the type of educational system that we aspire to have as a country, but also on the roles that all participants in the system shall have. The solutions to the crisis of our educational system go beyond budgetary adjustments and infrastructural enhancements. In 2006, after the most critical phase of the revolt, the government appointed a committee of experts that would define the guidelines for the establishment of a new educational paradigm. The result was a law that was rejected by the students who initiated the movement because it did not address the main issues that they had questioned. We have since then remained with the status quo in terms of legal action, which paradoxically has kept the movement alive. There appears no end to this revolutionary story on the horizon. Our community must keep the discussion alive by analyzing where we desire to take our educational system and, consequently, the type of country that we wish to bequeath our descendants.

A thorough discussion must not restrict itself to providing a definition of education and its paradigmatic relationship with the State, nor should it address exclusively the resources available to finance the resulting system. I believe that defining an educational system and establishing how it will be financed are two of the last issues that should be addressed at this time. As I see it, the authorities’ failure to meet the student movement’s demands can be explained precisely by their inability to understand the complexity of the problem and their stubbornness in continuing to tackle a solution from the wrong angle. There are many other factors that must be addressed at

this time before solutions can be set forth. For example, it is fundamental to analyze what would be expected of all participants of the system. What are the profiles of the students that would eventually complete each educational level? What would teachers be expected to know how to do? Who would be truly qualified to work in education? How should educational administrators be selected? Is the current system efficient? What role do families play? What role should the State play in the education of our young other than providing the resources for the functioning of the system? Will we be satisfied with seeing our children and adolescents hold diplomas that might—only might—state that they have been trained in a certain field of knowledge? What can be done to foster the intellectual curiosity that both Thoreau and Emerson regard as essential to attain truth in our lives? I have not heard or read many views on these matters. Given the significance of this intellectual curiosity as explained by these two authors, there is a risk that whatever solutions concocted by a team of experts in education in the not-so-distant future will not yield the expected results or will once again lead to disappointing results, thus complicating the problem. Our goal must be to create the conditions for “Man Thinking,” which involves providing equal opportunities across the entire educational system. To my knowledge, the student movement has not held the questions above as their war cry, and I do not believe that their counterparts have addressed them either. As in all social movements, the existence of leaders, representatives, or spokespersons automatically creates the blinding crowds against which Emerson warns. The comfort provided by the crowd might also translate into well-read graduates that might lack the questioning impulse that could make them better citizens and agents of change. That is why I think this is the right time to open the discussion to include the innermost views on this issue that concern us all. It is the time to be self-reliant and bring out our ideas about the country to which we aspire.

I am aware of how challenging modifying a rusty frame of mind is. We have become accustomed to the inner workings of a system to which we all belong. We tend to mistrust institutions, and we often talk about how little hope there is for a cultural community that is often perceived as passive and apathetic about their troubling issues. I also believe that the times in which we are living call for a more interactive construction of nations—with the participation of all their members. My own act of writing the ideas I have expressed in this essay is driven by my desire to communicate my personal views—with which many of my peers may disagree—because I see myself as one of the many participants in this process. Democracy at its very essence is found in the exchange of similar and dissimilar opinions, all of which can help shape and construct a brighter future. Acts of civil disobedience, no matter how small, have the potential to destabilize the establishment. By so doing, we can sever the ties that bind us to that establishment, an act that is the ultimate embodiment of our right to self-reliance.

**References**

- Emerson, R. W. (1985a). Self-Reliance. Concise Anthology of American Literature. G. McMichael (Ed.). New York and London: Macmillan.
- Emerson, R. W. (1985b). The American Scholar. Concise Anthology of American Literature. G. McMichael (Ed.). New York and London: Macmillan.
- Gandhi, M. (1999). The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. 98 vols. New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 1999. Retrieved from <http://www.gandhiserve.org/e/cwmg/cwmg.htm>
- Thoreau, H. D. (1985). Civil Disobedience. Concise Anthology of American Literature. G. McMichael (Ed.). New York and London: Macmillan.