

# HOLISTIC EDUCATION: LEARNING FOR AN INTERCONNECTED WORLD

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## Summary

This chapter presents detailed information about the birth of holistic education and the background of the approach. The chapter describes and compares the Waldorf and Montessori educational systems and the beliefs, values, and attitudes of each. Examples of holistic education are provided as well as techniques and strategies that can be used in the classroom during discussions about sustainability and a more sustainable future for the world.

## 1. Introduction

Holistic education has its roots in humanistic and progressive education, but differs from those approaches in that it includes the spiritual dimension. Its focus is on *wholeness*, and it attempts to avoid excluding any significant aspects of the human experience. It acknowledges that there is a part that is unknowable and irreducible within the human psyche. This has been called by many names within various religious traditions, for example: Atman, Buddha-nature, and Kingdom of God. A primary assumption of holistic education is that we should nurture this spiritual part of being as well as the intellectual, physical, and emotional.

A main element of holistic education is its focus on the *interconnectedness* of experience and reality. Both the scientist and the mystic have developed a picture of reality that indicates the deep interconnection of all things. In science this is seen at every level of the cosmos, from the atom to the biosphere. We know that a minor change in an ecosystem can lead to changes throughout the system. Spiritual teachers have also shared this insight. The Buddha's teachings focus on the interdependent nature of reality. The ancient Chinese teacher Lao-tse also had this vision and said that all things were connected through the Tao. The Suquamish Indian chief, Seattle, said on

his deathbed, “All things are connected like the blood which unites one family.” Holistic education attempts to be congruent with this reality.

In short, holistic education attempts to develop a pedagogy that is interconnected and dynamic and thus is in harmony with the cosmos. In contrast, much of traditional education tends to be static and fragmented, ultimately promoting alienation and suffering. Holistic education can be termed a *curriculum of connections*, and these connections will be described later in the chapter.

Holistic education focuses on the relationship between the whole and the part and suggests that teaching and learning approaches need to be rooted in a larger vision. If techniques are isolated and unrelated they can become dysfunctional. The holistic vision includes a sense of the whole person who is connected to his or her surrounding context and environment.

Another important aspect of holistic education is *inclusion*. It is inclusive in two ways: first, it rejects the labeling and segregating of students; and, secondly, it encourages the use of a wide range of teaching and learning strategies in order to reach diverse populations. One inclusive approach to learning is the use of various strategies. For example, *transmission learning* involves a one-way movement of information from teacher or text to the student with little or no opportunity for reflection or inquiry. The methods usually consist of lecture and drill. *Transaction learning*, on the other hand, is based on the assumption that students construct their own meaning and understandings. This is facilitated through inquiry learning and problem solving. Knowledge is viewed as more fluid and less fixed. A third strategy acknowledges the inner life of the student and views education as a process wherein the student can transform him or herself. This is called *transformative learning*.

Holistic education includes all of the above approaches. Teachers and schools must develop an appropriate relationship among the three forms. While there are situations where lectures and drill are appropriate, these should be balanced with other types of learning. There is no one model of holistic education; rather, each form should be organically connected to its context.

Holistic education challenges the present approach to education and its obsessive focus on standards and testing. Holistic educators see this approach as reflecting a materialist and consumerist culture that has reduced schooling to the training of individuals to compete and consume in the global marketplace. In fact, the present thrust can be seen as abandoning any attempt to educate the whole human being. It reduces schooling to training for the workplace that can be easily assessed through standardized tests.

## **2. Historical Roots of Holistic Education**

The holistic ideal can be traced back to indigenous cultures. In general, the aboriginal or indigenous person sees the earth and the universe as infused with meaning and purpose and not as cold and impersonal as in the case in the modern worldview. Holistic educators try to recover this sense of meaning and purpose in education as well as a natural sense of awe and wonder.

The Greeks argued for a holistic approach in learning. Socrates can be seen as a holistic educator because he encouraged each person to examine his or her own life: “know thyself.” The concept of holism comes from the Greek concept of *holon* that sees the universe as made up of integrated wholes that cannot be reduced in parts.

Rousseau, although more humanistic than holistic in his approach to education, did provide some underpinnings for holistic education. Rousseau viewed the child as essentially good and believed that the soul of the child should be allowed to unfold according to its own natural pattern. This view of the child as good is a basic assumption of holistic education, which rejects the fundamentalist view that children are born in original sin.

Pestalozzi, a Swiss educator influenced by Rousseau, put his ideas into practice. He believed that the classroom should be a place for meaningful activity, and he encouraged teachers to use their intuition. It was his belief that education is connected to a divine plan. He said, “God’s nature, which is in you, is held sacred in this House. We do not hem it in: we try to develop it.”

In the past century two of the most important holistic educators have been Rudolf Steiner and Maria Montessori. Steiner was the founder of the Waldorf school movement, which began shortly after World War I and has grown since its inception. There are around 800 Waldorf schools in approximately 46 different countries. Steiner distinctly referred to the “soul-life” of children and how it could be nurtured in a school setting. Waldorf education will be discussed in more detail later in this paper as one example of holistic educational practice.

Maria Montessori, the founder of the Montessori school movement, also believed in the importance of nurturing the spiritual development of children. She believed that mental, physical, and spiritual qualities of the human being are supported by a divine life source. With regard to the spiritual aspect, it was her belief that within each person there is a “spiritual embryo” that is developing according to a divine plan. Today, there are approximately 3,000 Montessori schools in the United States alone. Montessori education will be more fully discussed later in this chapter.

Holistic education became a visible educational movement during the 1980s. One defining event for the movement came in 1988 when *The Holistic Education Review* (now entitled *Encounter*) was first published. The *Review* and its successor have covered major developments in the field. In 1988, *The Holistic Curriculum*, by John P. Miller, was also published.

Another important event was a meeting in Chicago in 1990, which developed a statement that outlines some basic principles of Holistic Education. The statement contains a passage that is very relevant to this subject:

Holism emphasizes the challenge of creating a sustainable, just and peaceful society in harmony with Earth and its life. It involves an ecological sensitivity -- a deep respect for both indigenous and modern cultures as well as the diversity of life forms on the planet. Holism seeks to expand the way we look at ourselves and our relationship to the world

by celebrating our innate human potentials – the intuitive, emotional, physical, imaginative, and creative, as well as the rational, logical, and verbal. (Published in *Holistic Education Review*, 1990, 3(4) 65.

The statement, which was entitled, *Education 2000: A Holistic Perspective*, went on to define the central principles of Holistic Education:

- We assert that the primary – indeed fundamental – purpose of education is to nourish the inherent possibilities of human development.
- We call for each learner – young and old – to be recognized as unique and valuable. . . Each individual is inherently creative, has unique physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual needs and abilities, and possesses an unlimited capacity to learn.
- We affirm what the most perceptive educators have argued for centuries: education is a matter of experience. Learning is an active multi-sensory engagement between an individual and the world. . .
- We call for wholeness in the educational institutions and policies required to attain this aim. Wholeness implies that each academic discipline provides merely a different perspective on the rich, complex, integrated phenomenon of life.
- We hold. . . that educators ought to be facilitators of learning, which is an organic, natural process, and not a product that can be turned out on demand.
- We call for meaningful opportunities for real choice at every stage of the learning process.
- We call for a truly democratic model of education to empower all citizens to participate in meaningful ways in the life of the community and the planet.
- We believe that each of us – whether we realize it or not – is a global citizen. . . We believe that it is time for education to nurture an appreciation for the magnificent diversity of human experience. . .
- We believe that education must spring organically from a profound reverence for life in all its forms. We must rekindle a relationship between the human and the natural world that is nurturing, not exploitive.
- The most important and most valuable part of the person is his or her inner, subjective life – the self or the soul. . . We believe that education must nourish the healthy growth of the inner person. (Global Alliance for Transforming Education, 1991)

Since the Chicago meeting, there have been many conferences around the world exploring various aspects of Holistic Education. These conferences have taken place in Australia, Canada, England, Japan, Korea, Mexico, and the United States. Each of these countries has initiatives in holistic education; for example, there is the Japanese Society for Holistic Education. Holistic education, however, remains outside the mainstream, which is still dominated by the modernist approach with the emphasis on accountability and testing. Many holistic educators realize that change will be difficult because it involves deep cultural change.

### **3. Holistic Learning**

As noted before, Holistic education attempts to move away from the traditional, fragmented approaches to learning and focus on integration and connection. As much as

possible it seeks learning situations where the knowledge becomes part of the child's experience. Walt Whitman described this concept in his poem, "The Child Went Forth:"

There was a child went forth every day,  
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became,  
And that object became part of him for the day, or a certain part of the day,  
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.  
The early lilacs became part of the child,  
And grass and white and red morning-glories, and white and red clover, and the song  
Of the phoebe bird.  
And the third-Month lambs and the sow's pink-faint litter, and the mare's foal and  
The cow's calf.  
And the noisy brood of the barnyard or by the mire of the pond side,  
And the fish suspending themselves so curiously below there, and the beautiful  
Curious liquid,  
And the water-plants with their graceful flat heads, all became part of him.

The holistic teacher seeks the integration so that what the child encounters becomes part of him or her. Too often in school, knowledge is acquired for a test and quickly forgotten. Holistic learning is not satisfied with this approach. Six types of connections are described below that attempt to facilitate holistic learning:

- Linear thinking and intuition
- Relationship between mind and body
- Relationship among subjects
- Relationship between self and community
- Earth connections
- Self connections

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### **Bibliography**

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Beane, James (1997) *Curriculum Integration: Designing the Core of Democratic Education*. New York: Teachers College Press. [Attempts to redirect what is understood to be curriculum integration. The author moves the reader away from the idea of rearranging lesson plans to a curriculum design that is concerned

with enhancing student possibilities and opportunities for both personal and social integration. He achieves this by designing an academic curriculum centered around significant problems and issues that are identified by students and educators and are not limited by subject area boundaries. The academic learning environment draws organizational themes from the life experiences of both students and instructors. He advocates the application of knowledge to questions and concerns of personal significance to the learners to create a greater level of interest and participation in the learning process. Curriculum integration is seen as providing a broader access to knowledge and more opportunities for leaning and academic success.]

Dimonstein, G. (1971) *Children Dance in the Classroom*. N.Y.: MacMillan. [This book asserts that dance belongs in the classroom as an art form that facilitates a child's self-awareness and creative development. Through dance, a child may express his or her ideas, feelings, and sensory impressions. Movement is a fundamental element found in children's learning. Dance fosters the development of kinesthetic awareness, which is not only a bodily reaction to muscle memory, but also is a conscious perception of a body's ability to feel movement. Dance and creative movement provides a forum to integrate feelings and perceptions in a free and safe manner. Although copious examples are illustrated and meticulously defined, improvisation of technique is the ultimate goal for self-actualization in dance education.]

GATE (Global Alliance for Transforming Education) (1991) *Education 2000: A Holistic Perspective*. Atlanta, GA: GATE. [A vision statement calling for educational practices that better address future problems and that work to change current cultural practices which are destroying the earth's ecosystem. Guiding teaching principles include: the creation of healthy humans, not just productive workers; the honoring of individuality; using experience as a nurturer; holistic educational approaches; teachers as facilitators of learning; freedom of choice in the classroom; encouragement of participatory democracy; ethnic and cultural diversity; teaching of earth literacy; and the development of a spiritual dimension.]

Krishnamurti, J. (1953) *Education and the Significance of Life*. Harper and Row. [This short treatise presents the author's ideas about every facet of education. Intelligent, integrated human beings who are free from all constraints that limit thinking should be the goal of education. Self-knowledge is essential to achieve this end. The author is very critical of modern education and schooling which he believes produces thoughtless individuals whose freedom to think is limited by their societies and their cultures. The specialized, divisive knowledge perpetuated by modern schooling undermines the wisdom and understanding that are essential to achieve world peace.]

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\_\_\_\_\_. (1972) *The Secret of Childhood*. New York: Ballantine. [This hallmark piece succinctly explores the author's foundational philosophy of the inner world of children. The book demonstrates profound sensitivity to the elements that support the creation of a healthy psyche during the early years of childhood. A strong spiritual component is emphasized—from the point of view of both the adult and the child. The author warns against the undermining of personality by the subtle imposition of will from the adult to the child. Respect must be infused into every word and deed to allow for the celebration of liberty, inquiry, discovery and creativity that is the birthright of every child. Ultimately, following these guidelines, the child will majestically unfurl into his or her own persona, not because an adult teaches the child, but as the manifestation of the child's creation of his or her own identity.]

Neville, Bernie (1989) *Educating Psyche: Education, Imagination, and Unconsciousness In Learning*. Australia: Collins Dove. [This book discusses a wide range of learning strategies that nurture the student's imagination. Some of the strategies discussed include visualization, psychodrama, meditation, storytelling and the use of myths and legends. Hedley Bare in her introduction to the book suggests that the book will help make schools "more humane places and more compatible with the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century".]

Steiner, R. (1976) *Practical Advice for Teachers*. London: Rudolf Steiner Press. [This book is a compilation of 14 lectures that Steiner gave in 1919 on teaching methods that will engage the whole human being. According to Steiner, modern educational practice had lost its focus by concentrating on

skills for the workplace and other mundane aspects of life, instead of aiming for the total fulfillment of students as uniquely creative human beings. For him, art and music were essential for the early development of children. In later years, children should also be encouraged to understand their relationship with the environment and the cause/effect of events in human history. Throughout the educational life of a student connections are to be made so that all learning becomes an interconnected whole.]

Swimme, B. and T. Berry (1992) *The Universe Story*. San Francisco: Harper and Row. [The authors meld scientific and humanistic perspectives of the universe to create a more appropriate view of the human place in the cosmos. A basic explanation of the creation of the universe sets the stage for humanity's entry into the cosmos. Credit is given to early humans for their awareness of the primordial rhythms of the universe and to Pauli for his Exclusion Principle and to Einstein for his Cosmological Principle. The authors identify the advent of early technology as the moment when humanity began tragically to alter the earth's balance. The authors advocate an Ecozoic as opposed to a Technozoic approach to life as the key to a better relationship between humans and the universe. An Ecozoic approach to life consists of three main elements: acceptance, protection, and the fostering of a balanced universe.]

### **Biographical Sketch**

**John (Jack) P. Miller** has worked in the area of humanistic/holistic education for over 30 years. Currently he is Professor and Coordinator of Holistic and Aesthetic Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto where he teaches courses in Holistic Education and Spirituality in Education. He is author/coauthor of twelve books including *Education and the Soul* and *The Holistic Curriculum*. The latter has been translated into Japanese and Korean and Jack has traveled several times to Asia to work with Holistic Educators there.