

Philosophical Sources of Holistic Education

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In American social and intellectual history, the period between 1960 and 1980 will always be recognized as a significant cultural turning point, a time of intense creativity, experimentation, rebellion and integration. Mass movements for social change, such as the civil rights movement (the quest for racial justice and equality) and the women's liberation movement, and popular critiques of industrial society such as environmentalism, emerged and grew dramatically during these years. Mainstream religious institutions were challenged when thousands of young people began to explore the meditative traditions of Asia, particularly Buddhism and schools of yoga. Science and technology opened up an uncharted new world that seemed to shatter the limitations on human thought and imagination. Humanistic and transpersonal psychologists began to discuss "human potential" and unfamiliar states of consciousness. Traditional ideas about the family—the socially approved roles of men, women and children—were challenged, and new ideas about education, questioning the authority of schools and teachers, began to spread. In the academic world, scholars described a "postmodern" worldview that was beginning to influence every area of society.

Out of this historical context emerged an educational philosophy known as *holistic* education. The term itself began to be used around 1979, when a group of humanistic psychologists and educators held a conference in California (Harris, 1980). The concept spread slowly until, in the late 1980s, a Canadian scholar, John P. Miller, published his book *The Holistic Curriculum* (1988) and I founded a new journal in the U.S. called *Holistic Education Review*. In the years since then, the perspective of "holistic education" has become the subject of conferences, articles and books, doctoral dissertations, and a few teacher training programs. It is still a marginal movement, of interest to only a few thousand educators scattered across several nations, and has had little influence on the official education policies of any nation in the era of corporate

globalization and standardization that followed and curtailed the cultural rebellion of the 1960s and 1970s. But I believe that this countercultural philosophy of education may reflect a new postindustrial civilization that is struggling to emerge around the world.

In one sense, the holistic education movement is a product of the intellectual and cultural ferment of the 1960s and 70s. It tends to attract educators and parents who believe that conventional schools reflect a narrow image of human possibilities and impose restrictive limits on children's unique potentials. Instead of merely preparing children to become "well educated" national citizens or productive participants in the economic system, holistic educators are interested in cultivating spirituality, reverence for the natural environment, and a sense of social justice. They seek to inspire children's creativity, imagination, compassion, self-knowledge, social skills, and emotional health. In this way, the term "holistic education" simply means cultivating the whole person and helping individuals live more consciously within their communities and natural ecosystems. These kinds of concerns were not common in modern industrialized societies before the 1960s. Schooling in modern society has aimed primarily to impose a rational discipline on human impulses, so that individuals will find their places in well managed political and economic systems. One of the distinct features of the emerging postmodern civilization is personal and cultural resistance to this sort of discipline and management. Since the 1960s, new emphasis has been placed on human diversity, spontaneity and creativity—and holistic education is a direct expression of this emphasis.

Yet the roots of holistic education go back well before the 1960s; as a serious intellectual movement it is grounded in a synthesis of several well established philosophical and pedagogical perspectives. Holistic thinkers often draw from the work of theorists from the early and mid twentieth century including Alfred North Whitehead ("process" philosophy), Carl Jung (archetypal psychology), Sri Aurobindo (integral philosophy), Gregory Bateson (cybernetics), and Ludwig von Bertalanffy (systems theory) among others. Most recently, a school of thought known as "spiral dynamics" has become prominent in the holistic literature (Beck and Cowan, 1996). In *The Wholeness Principle* (1990), Anna Lemkow identified the fundamental beliefs of this worldview: "the oneness and unity of all life; the all-pervasiveness of ultimate Reality or the

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Absolute; the multi-dimensionality or hierarchical character of existence” (p. 23). Holism asserts that the universe is an undivided, interconnected whole, and that this whole embodies an all-encompassing creative source through many layers or contexts. When Lemkow speaks of the “hierarchical” character of existence, she means that some phenomena are more inclusive and embracing—more whole—than others; they serve as larger contexts within which less inclusive phenomena make sense. Other holistic thinkers, like Ken Wilber, use the term “holarchical,” indicating that reality is essentially comprised of wholes within wholes within wholes (Wilber, 1995). Nothing exists without some context, nothing is merely a disjointed, disconnected piece.

The British writer Aldous Huxley called this perspective the “perennial philosophy”—the core of most of the world’s mystical and spiritual traditions. This conception of reality recognizes an “Absolute” or “source” that exists behind physical surface appearances. But this spiritual dimension is not remote, occult or otherworldly; rather, it is considered to be the ultimate context, the ultimate meaning, the deepest essence, of all created things. Theorists such as John P. Miller (2000), Rachael Kessler (2000) and many others (Miller and Nakagawa, 2002) place spirituality at the heart of holistic education; it is above all education for the *soul*, for the essence, of the human being, not only for the social and psychological surface of the personality. For these theorists, spirituality is not confined to religious institutions and practices (though it is most often expressed through them); it is larger, more whole, than our cultural portrayals of it, and infinitely expansive, creative, and evolving.

By starting from a position of oneness, unity and essential spirituality, a holistic perspective emphasizes the complementarity of all phenomena; in place of division and opposition, it sees the world as a dynamic balance of forces. Wholeness includes light and shadow, joy and suffering, feminine and masculine, mind and matter, human and nonhuman, and so on. In this view, the world is not divided into exclusive categories or unsolvable contradictions. This worldview is comfortable with paradox, mystery and emergence. A holistic epistemology seeks synthesis and integration rather than analysis and dissection; as the holistic educational theorist Parker Palmer has written, this way of

knowing involves an empathic, caring dialogue with the world, rather than a manipulative, calculating intelligence (Palmer, 1993).

A second intellectual source of holistic education is the revolution in scientific thinking that began with relativity theory and quantum mechanics. The most creative scientists of recent decades—people like physicists David Bohm and Fritjof Capra, biologists Rupert Sheldrake, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, and chemist Ilya Prigogine, to name a few—all reject the Newtonian model of mechanistic cause-and-effect processes in nature. They understand the universe as dynamically unfolding, comprised of intricate patterns and relationships, as being meaningful rather than mechanistic. They argue that reductionism—taking phenomena apart into the smallest possible components—does not adequately explain the essential qualities of living beings or natural processes. They speak about a mysterious “web of life” that knits the world together (Capra, 1996), or about a “morphogenetic field” (Sheldrake, 1991) or an “implicate order” (Bohm, 1980)—the unseen but real context for the design of physical forms. Researchers in neuroscience have been suggesting that the human brain, as well, is vastly more creative and intricate than the calculating machine to which it has often been compared. Classical definitions of intelligence have been challenged by an emerging theory of “multiple intelligences” (Gardner, 1993) that highlights the diversity and complexity of the ways the human mind comes to know the world.

The holistic perspective also reflects the growing ecological awareness of the past thirty years. Mainstream society has become more accepting of efforts to reduce pollution, preserve wilderness and endangered species, or to develop new technologies for producing energy and materials from renewable sources. But ecological thought goes deeper. Many forms of environmentalist philosophy and activism have emerged to challenge the modernist/industrial economy. Some visionary leaders in the business world have begun to describe more sustainable or ecologically rooted forms of economic production (e.g. Hawken, Lovins and Lovins, 1999). There are still more radical critiques of modern industrial society that question some of the most fundamental assumptions underlying industrial culture’s relationship to the natural world. For example, “deep ecology” (Naess, 1989) challenges the anthropocentric view that humans are, or should

be, the dominant species in the global ecosphere. “Social ecology” (Bookchin, 1990) explores the link between authoritarian, hierarchical political structures and humanity’s exploitation of the natural world. In recent years many authors have explored the spiritual and psychological dimensions of humanity’s relationship to other species of life and to nature as a whole (e.g. Roszak, 1992; Fox, 1995; Shepard, 1999).

The literature in all these areas has expanded enormously in recent years, and holistic education has been significantly influenced by it. In the work of theorists such as David Orr (1992), C.A. Bowers (1995), Gregory Smith and Dilafruz Williams (1999), David Jardine (2000), and many others, ecological education is presented as a radical critique of the modernist epistemology that dominates conventional schooling. A holistic ecological education does not simply aim to teach young people scientific facts about nature, but to cultivate a direct, active, experiential relationship with the processes of life. Such authors speak of an “ecological literacy”—a more engaged, compassionate, sensual way of knowing the world, completely opposed to the manipulative, mechanical way of knowing that predominates in modern culture. One book that has been influential among holistic educators, Gregory Cajete’s *Look to the Mountain* (1994), contrasts modern “Western” forms of knowledge with indigenous (Native American) epistemology and education, which Cajete describes as nourishing a meaningful, spiritual relationship between the individual, the community, and the natural world.

A fourth philosophical source of the contemporary holistic education movement is an emerging globalist or transnationalist perspective, often associated with an ideology of pacifism. Not to be confused with the corporate economic trend of globalization, a holistic transnationalism emphasizes the commonalities among cultures and the universality of human wants and needs. Although national citizenship and cultural heritage are important elements of our identity, there is a larger context—a more inclusive whole—that embraces all of humanity; writers in this literature sometimes refer to the “human family.” This perspective challenges the limitations and prejudices of nationalism, which, as we have seen in recent years, have spawned partisan violence in many parts of the world. Probably the most influential thinker in this movement is former

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United Nations official Robert Muller, whose book *New Genesis* (1982) and whose idea for a “world core curriculum” have served as inspiration to many holistic educators.

Another influence on holistic thinking, though perhaps more subtle than most of the others, is the emergence of contemporary feminism. Curiously, the holistic literature rarely explicitly cites feminist theorists, and surprisingly few of the leading voices in holistic education are women. Nevertheless, the entire moral and philosophical tone of holistic thinking reflects an intellectual milieu where the masculine perspective has learned to respect traditionally feminine concerns such as inclusiveness, nurturing, emotional expression, embodiment, peacefulness, cooperation and equality. A leading American philosopher of education, Nel Noddings (1992), has emphasized that a feminist perspective is essentially concerned with *caring*—that is, forming bonds or connections between people such that every person’s experience is of concern to others. Feminist cultural historian Riane Eisler has developed what she calls a “partnership” approach—a society grounded in values of equality, nonviolence and caring—and applied its principles to educational theory (2000). These ideas are very clearly congruent with the holistic perspective and provide a strong expression of the moral values that lie at its core.

Finally, the holistic education movement is built on the foundation of various alternative pedagogies that first emerged in the early twentieth century and gained in popularity during the cultural upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s. Several innovative educators from different nations, representing diverse social, political and religious orientations, argued that conventional schooling is an authoritarian and constricting form of socialization, and they developed alternative approaches that they believed to be more genuinely responsive to the natural rhythms of children’s development and to the distinctive personalities and interests of individual students. Maria Montessori in Italy, Rudolf Steiner in Germany, J. Krishnamurti in India, John Dewey in the U.S., Francisco Ferrer in Spain, and A.S. Neill in England devised practical methods and radical theories that challenged basic assumptions about schooling, teaching and learning (Miller, 1997). Many, if not most, of the educators who began calling themselves “holistic” in the 1980s and 1990s had been substantially influenced by one or more of these alternative

movements. It remains true that a larger number of educators are exclusively identified with one approach or another (for example, they consider themselves to be “Montessorians” or “progressive educators” and do not use the term “holistic”), but if we consider them “holarchically,” they are clearly part of an emerging holistic movement that is broader than any one constituency, and in time I believe we will see more alliances and mutual influence between these various groups.

This paper has provided a brief overview of the intellectual sources of holistic education. It is always difficult to write about holism, because by definition, a holistic perspective includes numerous connected aspects. Each topic in this essay deserves a paper, if not an entire book, to be properly explained. My purpose here is not to fully articulate, or effectively defend, the principles of holistic thinking, but only to introduce them as possibilities for further consideration.

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