

Commentary: Social Justice and Holistic Education—A Renewal

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Abstract

This letter demonstrates the inadequacies of the current approach to social justice in children, and of the understanding of children upon which much social justice education is based. The information herein is based on 40 years of experience of optimizing well-being and social justice in children in a variety of Holistic and Relationship-Based Education settings. It is a call to refine our attunement to the evolving consciousness of the child, to nurture the developmental imperatives of each stage, and to allow children's inherent social justice gifts to unfold naturally.

Keywords: holistic education, social justice, relationship-based education, consciousness

Dear Colleagues,

Finally, perhaps the systemic shadow underbelly of social injustice is coming to light and seems to be awakening our natural capacity and wisdom for social justice (SJ) to be known and hopefully actualized. I can say “about time” as I have been keenly aware of the violent predation for 60 of my 74 years. Yet, 400 years of ancestral wounding for African-Americans is much, much longer.

We must continue to answer the call for SJ. Perseverance furthers. I know many Holistic Educators (HE) have concern that our work has been siloed into private schools and venues that unfortunately, and perhaps insidiously, depend upon and reinforce privilege. I agree, yet I know from direct experience that bringing Holistic Education forth in this insensitive and unjust society is challenging and often disheartening. Pioneers blunder, yet persevere, due to their inner convictions. Yet, we have the obligation, not the mandate, to emerge towards greater inclusion.

What can HE offer teachers in traditional education/child care venues? The answer is not techniques and programs; but with a holistic understanding of children, with attendant applications which any educator can employ. Specifically, the renewal begins with a question: What are the natural inherent social justice gifts that live in each child?

I wonder, though, how many HE's appreciate and bring forth actualization of the SJ gifts that each child naturally manifests every day. In my 40 years on the trail I have rarely

seen an educator acknowledge the SJ natural capacities in children. Moreover, I often encounter resistance from HE educators that children bring gifts of SJ with the rationalization that social justice activities with students are sufficient to bring forth a deep abiding knowledge of themselves as socially just.

This letter demonstrates the inadequacies of the current approach to SJ in children, and of the understanding of children upon which much social justice education is based. The information herein is based on 40 years of experience of optimizing well-being and social justice in children in a variety of Holistic and Relationship-Based Education settings, not just understanding or data or comprehension.

I have seen many attempts to incorporate SJ teaching into curriculum. Environmental educators bring colorful graphics, create field trips, and present historical and factual information. Humanities programs reframe history by bringing attention to diverse cultural backgrounds as well as creating opportunities for contact with many cultures. Students engage service projects and perhaps attend protests or presentations on diversity and injustice. Curricular activities often include Project Based Learning programs with social justice themes, or information about food distribution, or current resource inequities. All this and more can be found in some mainstream schools and many alternative schools.

Holistic Education goes further. HE educators are encouraged to build relationships with students and one

another. Some version of the whole child that includes spiritual, emotional, physical, and cognitive capacities permeates the school culture. There is often a parent program with speakers and an opportunity for parent input. Teachers are vetted for holistic understanding and provided professional development support. Portfolios and student presentations replace metrics as a way to assess a child's learning. Learning styles are respected and time in nature valued. Creative learning approaches, such as co-creating the ethos within the school with students, or allowing art to demonstrate learning, or lessons that interweave emotional and cognitive learning with physical or musical or interpersonal engagement. There might even be a nod toward intrapersonal learning with mindfulness practices or journaling. Of course, there is often a restorative justice discipline approach replacing punishment.

Unfortunately, none of the above is sufficient to bring about the desired aim of a society of just people. These programs often help incrementally and in localized situations but they certainly do not lead to the needed social justice. A shift in consciousness with a concurrent shift in paradigms can accomplish that.

None of the above programs see through a child's eyes and feel through a child's heart. None are centered and sourced in the child's field of knowing (i.e., the child's consciousness).

What, then of the holistic educators, philosophers, and theorists? I study our Holistic Education genealogy and I see brilliance everywhere. Wisdom abounds about philosophy, spirituality, and psychological treatises on wholeness. There are critiques of thought and various forms of education that limit learning and reinforces ideas of the dominator power structure, examples of pedagogies respectful of the child, anthropological and biological research demonstrating the importance of relationship and holistic approaches, curriculum that allows self-expression and experiential learning, and the need for students "to be known."

My study is inclusive, and thorough. In addition, I have learned much and have the grace of personal experience with many contemporary Holistic Educators. While informing and substantiating the multitude of creative holistic programs and schools, they do not see the world as the child sees it. The child remains an object, worthy of respect and dignity and the opportunity for relevant education.

There is always something missing. Former developmentalists have been unsuccessful because they each approach children from a top down, Euro-centric perspective. Ken Wilber offers arcane references of child development with little practical understanding or application. Many theories of development are unidirectional

(adult to child) as many deconstructionists point out. Many former theories of child development have relied on surveys and interviews. How many have engaged fieldwork with children? Children are studied in schools, and perhaps observed in the playground. Observations, data collection, and the resulting conclusions are based on the child's behavior. Howard Gardner's contribution of Intelligences sources in categories of human talents, not the child's field of knowing from which intelligence arises.

Various spiritual traditions provide little information about the spiritual nature of the child, nor about awakening the child's innate spirituality. Questions remain unanswered such as: What is devotion and how does it change throughout childhood? How do children perceive death and what is its effect on their connection to Earth, Love, or Spirit? Should children meditate—and if so, how and at what ages? How do children of varying ages perceive time, community, aesthetics, or sex? Each of these qualities of Being influence a child's social justice engagement.

Hopefully, this letter is helping to elucidate how these and many other qualities of our humanity, our very Being, are critical to enter the child's worldview, to know as they know, to see with their eyes, to feel with their hearts. Not top down through research, not through partial lenses of emotion, cognition, or taught spirituality, and not by delivering information to be tested later for retention.

Connection with a child's consciousness is a different order of relationship in education. Consciousness is our knowing faculty. All of the above—stories, traditions, research, are contents of consciousness, not consciousness itself. As such they offer partial glimpses into the nature of consciousness. But they do not describe how the child knows, and knows that they know. It's the same as the story of the three blind people who by touching a part of the elephant they could reach, thought that they could describe the whole and know something about the whole elephant. Even a person listening to all the descriptions of the parts could not imagine the elephant seen at once, whole. And unless used judiciously describing parts inhibits rather than nurtures holistic learning and emergent autopoiesis, self-creating.

Books and research about beauty, or love, or music education; affirmations such as gratitude, kindness, and mindfulness have temporary value. Each offers part of the picture. However, without participation in a child's field of knowing an educator cannot connect to the child's Whole Being. From the child's perspective, learning is either "about" something, or taking a dip into an experience that is quickly overwhelmed by conditioning or cultural pressures.

We are whole beings. As such, diversity should not be a social justice tenet of Holistic Education. The good thing is that people from everywhere recognize that education needs to transform and they enter the fray. But holistic means the essence of our humanity and of our species, not of a given culture. So, sure, we are grateful for the company and relationship, but teaching about diversity is not the answer to social justice.

Actually, over-valuing diversity is compensation to the predatory colonization of dominators, a noble goal, but one that is achieved by shifts in consciousness and a new paradigm. Dissolving the obnoxious “isms” that divide and wound is a natural outcome of the needed shifts. I feel these struggles and I actively support the efforts, but reactions to the dominator culture can only create a space for the shift to occur.

When I see the attachment to the contents of consciousness rather than nourishing consciousness directly I despair that Holistic Education will not significantly contribute to the desired social justice transformation. When I see Holistic Education reduced to programs and outcomes in schools and justified in research rather than rooted in fieldwork that includes home and social venues the despair intensifies. I lose confidence that social justice organizations will turn to Holistic Education for guidance. For instance, despite the emphasis on education in this Black Lives Matter moment I must ask, has any affiliated organization or school turned to Holistic Education as a response?

Further, why do holistic educators believe that we have to teach gratitude or kindness when these are natural human consciousness qualities? Do HE educators teach these things as an antidote to selfishness in the zeitgeist? Is that what Holistic Education is? An antidote or an emergent transformation of consciousness as expressed in a new paradigm? And if consciousness is central then how is it that the child’s consciousness is not at the center of all holistic inquiries, expressions, and activities?

All emotions enrich and enliven. All emotions have meaning. Engaged without judgment they bring forth emotional wisdom. Gurdjeff and Rumi and Humanistic psychologists such as Carl Rogers insist on the importance of feeling all our feelings as fundamental to wholeness. Rogers names it as central to a fully functioning human. In Tibetan Buddhism, Mara is nothing less than clinging to personal likes and dislikes. Self-knowledge makes no distinction about which emotions we live, but rather, self-knowledge is about allowing consciousness, our field of knowing to be free of judgment so that we can know ourselves as we are. Moreover, denial of any emotion through judgment denies our evolutionary self, our very Being as Life on Earth.

Participating in sadness, bitterness, frustration, and anger without judgment can lead to helplessness, a vast emptiness in which no response to the situation appears. In the experience of helplessness, we are stripped clean. At this moment compassion arises.

Compassion is not empathy or sympathy or sentimentality. Feelings of compassion seek to neither preserve nor favor the compassionate person. In compassion insights and action arise which allow for the best available well-being for all participants. Here’s compassion for MLK: “But it really doesn’t matter to me now, because I’ve been to the mountain top. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life – longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will.” This is how and why Josette and I have devoted 40 years of our lives to Natural Learning Relationships.

The development of a healthy conscience is the essence of social justice. Conscience is a feeling word and justice is higher emotional feeling. Knowledge of murder as injustice rise effortlessly as a feeling. No rationalization needed. Is conscience just “knowing right from wrong?” Obviously right and wrong are cultural and often religious comments, not absolutes. There is nothing objective in our beliefs in right and wrong and often they objectify.

Conscience is the ability to feel all of one’s feelings without judgment, identify those feelings, and fear none of our feelings. This is a remarkable attribute of consciousness, of the knowing faculty. I offer my experience as recounted above as an example. How then does conscience change in the unfolding fields of knowing in children? Isn’t it critical for a holistic educator to explore this both in them and through conscientious holistic research and fieldwork? The ability to monitor, navigate, self-regulate, and discriminate between different emotions is learned from experience with caring trustworthy guidance (from a healthy educator) to engage and express feelings appropriately.

Lack of appreciation of conscience leads to egregious confusion about education and social justice. As one brief example, experiential learning that calls forth expression of values with students, with judicious mentoring that eliminates judgment of these values, nourishes a ten year old child’s innate connection to SJ. Conversely, teaching about SJ or the history of injustice attenuates that natural capacity.

Much emphasis is placed on the spiritual capacities of children as if its activation is the key to wholeness and holistic learning. Josette and I work with the Tibetan Teachers in Exile at Sarah College in Northern India, but a few miles from the Dalia Lama’s residence. For approximately 1,500 years Buddhism has permeated all

aspects of Tibetan life, generating brilliant spiritually aware people, philosophers, art, and ethicists. After he detailed the lack of understanding of children's growth and the consequent deterioration of education with attendant traditional practices of corporal punishment and meaningless tests we asked Passang Tsering, the Principle of the College, why he chose to invite us and NLR into his Teacher Training. He said simply: "Consciousness. NLR whole-child development is the only approach to children I know that is based in consciousness." He then added: "I am also hoping that you can help us understand and implement the social-emotional information that Emory University provided when they were here. It seems useful but the teachers have no idea how to implement it."

I revere Indigenous Wisdom and have had the grace of directly experiencing it with elders. And I know Earth and Nature as portals to awaken "inner knowing." I see the correlate with the UN Earth Charter and accept and practice its principles. Where, though, is the connection to the natural unfolding fields of knowing in each of us? If participating in Earth rhythms allows holistic learning, then how is it attuned to the life cycle of the natural human? When and how is the window open for specific experiential opportunities to learn? And a human in most societies does not have the consistent intimate opportunities with elders or with nature to simply absorb Earth's profound lessons. I do not doubt that these lessons can be transmitted in our times. I only ask why children's natural unfolding fields of knowing are not understood and incorporated. It seems an oversight and I fear undermines the potency of this venerable transmission.

Our culture has a fascination with famous leaders. Popularizing SJ leaders reflects social progress. However, emphasizing famous social justice leaders has limited value in stimulating social justice in children. Aside from the obvious question of which leaders to emphasize when and to what degree, it reinforces the notion of specialness, separateness, conquest, and striving. The thing is, SJ is a natural human capacity that can be nourished in daily life. The trick is to offer the right information at the right time in the right way.

Relationship Based Education is a central tenet of Holistic Education. We recognize that learning depends on the relationship among all participants. We engage students, know their backgrounds and attempt to provide learning environments, and even communities, where we honor one another. However, there is one relationship missing. How do educators grow in their relationship with students? Do we, as educators, deepen our self-knowledge as part of our teaching practice? Do we gain new insights in devotion, service, trust, and social justice as part of our self-care? Can we recall our own contributions to social justice when we were 11 or 15

and how that influences our facilitation of social justice with children? Even if, through journaling or meditation, the teacher notices some personal changes, how does this translate to relationship with children? Is there reverence for bi-directional development, for the learning that truly connecting with the child's consciousness (field of knowing) brings to the teacher? Nothing less than emergence in well-being and self-knowledge is available to holistic educators if we participate in the consciousness of our students, including deepening our own capacity for SJ.

Children bring so much more. When seen and nourished in everyday life, their innate capacities for social justice bind society, stimulate social change, refresh appreciation of the meaning of social justice, bring creative responses, and lead to living interconnection with Earth and all life.

Any and all feedback and comments on this letter are welcome. You can write to the editors of HER or to me at ba@luvmourconsulting.com. I am open to continuing this dialogue.

Respectfully,

ba

Acknowledgement

Co-creator of Natural Learning Relationships with his wife Josette, they have spent 40 years facilitating seminars for parents, leading a learning center that offered unique holistic programs for children of all ages, family seven day immersion programs for whole families, directing three Relationship-based schools, training teachers and social service agency staff, working with various learning and spiritual communities, homeschooling as well as facilitating homeschool support groups, and speaking at many conferences. Their books and E-books can be found at Powells.com and Amazon.