

# Editorial: Broadening the Circle of Holistic Education

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## Abstract

The new editors of the *Holistic Education Review* (HER) summarize the content of the May, 2021 issue in three categories: The past—voices of wisdom; the present—practices in holistic education; and the future—broadening the circle of holistic education. The editors define the latter, broadening the circle, according to two aspirational goals: 1) To be a force for decolonizing education and prioritizing equity in education. 2) To actively promote holistic education in public schools as a social justice agenda, so all children may gain access to an education that honors the whole person, body, mind, and spirit and that fosters social and ecological wellbeing. In particular, the editorial critically examines the risk of holistic education as a pedagogy of privilege if we are not actively engaging in dialogue around social justice. Therefore, the editors invite diverse and emergent holistic educators and scholars to submit articles and engage in dialogue that advances holistic education as education for meaning and social justice.

Keywords: *Holistic Education Review*, editorial, holistic education, decolonizing education, social justice

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Dear Reader,

I invite you to imagine all of us—authors, readers, educators, learners—in a circle together. In this circle we are engaged in a sacred moment that is familiar to most holistic educators—the opening ritual that initiates a class, a meeting, or a gathering. In this case, our ritual is initiating the journey of the new *Holistic Education Review: Education for Meaning and Social Justice* (HER). I invite you to close your eyes and take three deep breaths: One for our past—with reverence for the legacy of holistic education. One for the present—noticing what is alive in our hearts. One for the future—with your exhale blowing forth hope toward the next Seven Generations of learners. May all be well.

Our theme for this first issue—Broadening the Circle of Holistic Education—represents the past and present of holistic education, while gazing toward the future.

## The Past—Voices of Wisdom

Among this issue's content are some of the wise elders of the American and Canadian holistic education movement. Parker Palmer intimately shares his inner journey of existential anguish transformed through forgiveness and gratitude in an interview with Amir Freimann. Palmer is tender, vulnerable, and a model of contemplative wisdom. Jack Miller offers a

chapter of his about-to-be-published memoirs, *A Holistic Educator's Journey: Seeking Wholeness in America, Canada, Japan, and Asia*. Jack's chapter is about the Asian Pacific holistic movement where he assisted with Bhutan's effort to transform its education system and economic system to aim for "gross national happiness" goals. Susan Schiller and Gary Babiuk's review of *A Holistic Educator's Journey* provides a larger scope of the book for our readers. Ba Luvmour submitted a letter promoting his particular approach to social justice education. Octogenarian leader and scholar Phil Gang's newest book, *Educating for Right Action and Love: Extending and Expanding the Montessori Vision*, asks: What liberates teachers and learners to be who they have been created to be? Steve Arnold writes a poetic review of Gang's book, in which Arnold documents the forever evolving worldview of a contemplative educator, such as Gang: "And the pulse of love beats on."

## The Present—Practices in Holistic Education

This issue of *HER* provides a window into current practices and events of holistic education from two educators and an academic scholar. Michael Carberry, a school leader, describes his holistic school's journey through the COVID crisis. Montessori teacher and novelist Barbara Roether provides lyrical prose describing place-based education

(PBE) and offering vignettes from her PBE experiences around the world. Ashwani Kumar describes a dialogical, meditative inquiry practice, applicable to classroom education and scholarly research methodology. We also have an advocacy piece in this issue: a letter from the Coalition for the Future of Education to the Biden Administration with a heart-centered call for action. For events, there is an announcement about the upcoming Holistic Teaching and Learning Conference in Ashland, Oregon and a review of the 2021 Krishnamurti and the Contemporary World Crisis Conference.

### **The Future—Widening the Circle of Holistic Education**

The future, of course, is yet to come. We editors of *HER* offer two articles that most represent our vision for widening the circle of holistic education—a vision we hope will become a shared vision for the future of the holistic education community. We envision *HER* as a lever for widening our circle in two critical ways:

- 1) To be a force for decolonizing education and prioritizing equity in education.
- 2) To actively promote holistic education in public schools as a social justice agenda, so all children may gain access to an education that honors the whole person, body, mind, and spirit and that fosters social and ecological wellbeing.

*HER* will encourage the holistic education community to be radically self-critical, always comparing our values with our behaviors and systems. Four Arrows, in many of his writings, emphasizes how indigenous wisdom and holistic education are a natural fit for one another. He and Jack Miller co-authored an article in 2012 for *Encounter* in which they remind us that holistic practice began with indigenous peoples. They list three commonalities between indigenous education and holistic education:

1. An awareness to the deep interconnectedness of life
2. A sense of the sacred
3. Educating the whole person

When these principles are fully integrated in education, aspects of the dominant Western worldview, such as individualism and competition, move toward Indigenous values, such as collectivism and collaboration. In this issue, William Greene writes a review on Four Arrows' most recent book, *Sitting Bull's Words: Walking Backwards into the Future*, in which Four Arrows provides guidance to transform a dominant worldview orientation into indigenous perspective using holistic approaches.

With an indigenous orientation, holistic education can naturally promote a culturally responsive, decolonized pedagogy, but only when we holistic educators, as individuals, recognize whether we are of a socially dominant identity, such as being White or from the Middle class, and commit to the arduous work of identifying our ethnocentric assumptions, biases, and fragility. As a community, our work is to examine our systems for structural barriers to equity, as well to what degree our school cultures support cultural openness and responsiveness, or still need work.

Debbie Millon's article *Whiteness and Race Matter in Holistic Education* engages us in an honest and unflinching self-examination of how whiteness is often centered in holistic schools. She recounts the pain of losing families of color who find themselves in the margins among Euro-American students and Euro-centric curriculum. Much deeper than teaching towards tolerance or goals of diversity, Debbie courageously asks the hard questions about the relevance of holistic and progressive education if it continues to be dominated by the voices of the more privileged parts of the education landscape. "A holistic education approach that ignores racism and whiteness will be perceived as uninformed, if not irrelevant and racist." Can we "evolve together" along with a holistic pedagogy that includes an ontology of explicitly de-centering whiteness?

### **What is our purpose?**

It's an auspicious time to be in public education! Few educators understand the magnitude of the new Federal ESSA legislation of 2015, which opens the door for state educational associations to become more open and innovative. The legislation's "fifth indicator," as it is called, gives states the flexibility to use a non-academic indicator of school quality (in addition to the government's previous four academic accountability measures). A state may self-determine, for example, that social emotional learning is a key indicator of educational quality and use culture and climate surveys as a measure.

Scott Nine, Assistant Superintendent, Office of Education Innovation and Improvement at the Oregon Department of Education says, "There is no better opportunity in the last 30 years for educators to develop schools that are equitable, innovative, and offer well-rounded learning experiences than in the last 30 years, but principals and teachers don't know how to do it!" Most public school leaders and educators are so conditioned by the industrial model of education in which they were raised, and they are so obedient toward voices of past authority, that they lack the skills and imagination to develop a cohesive holistic education. But it is not for lack of desire.

There are many pedagogical streams currently in education that indicate a public move away from the failed education reform efforts toward humanizing, holistic, experiential, developmental models of educating the whole human.

Consider the mindfulness movement, which has exploded in the last decade. Fifteen years ago, I never would have believed mindfulness would be a common practice in public schools. Now, social emotional learning (SEL) is also becoming far more common, with several school districts around the country currently designated as SEL school districts, and some states adopting SEL guidelines. Research by the Aspen Institute (2018) indicates approximately 90% of educational leaders, teachers, and parents support SEL. The pandemic has heightened recognition of the mental health crisis our students and families are experiencing (Fullan & Gallagher, 2020) due to an unjust society and to a public education system misled by the “measure and punish” strategies of school reform.

With the advent of new technology and neurological research, which have demonstrated how the human brain works, new best practices in education are meant to heal trauma and increase equity through relationship-based and mindfulness-informed models of education. Restorative justice and restorative practices are replacing exclusionary and punishment-based forms of discipline. Educators are learning that each child has a story, and when children are in a school community where their individual story is listened to with empathy, they feel as if they belong. When a child feels a strong sense of belonging in their school community, bullying dramatically decreases and a sense of self-worth and academic achievement increases (Aspen Institute, 2018)

As we cross over into a student population that is 50% non-white the need to steer away from the Euro-centric traditional American curriculum and embrace content that sees History, for example, through the eyes of marginalized and colonized peoples, is finally becoming a mandate in some states. Educators see the value of building community in the classroom in less individualistic and competitive ways to instead create classroom cultures that are more relevant to students with Eastern, Indigenous, or more communal values.

There are also multiple movements toward more meaningful, student-centered, and experiential ways of learning, such as service learning, project-based learning, place-based learning, universal design for learning, environmental education...and the list goes on. Some of these student-centered pedagogies used to be reserved for gifted and talented students, resulting in even greater inequities. Now the research is clear that it is students from historically underserved populations and those who previously struggled

with traditional education who most benefit from holistic aspects of education (Franke, 2014).

So far, many of these various programs in public school are “tacked on” curriculums or approaches that often lack a cohesive schoolwide paradigm shift to holistic education. However, we at *HER* propose that all these movements—when combined—become a massive movement toward well-rounded, equitable, holistic education in our public schools. And our vision for *HER* is to be a catalyst and supporter for a holistic movement that is underway. Harkening back to Scott Nine’s concern that educators don’t know how to implement well-rounded education, *HER* and the holistic education community are here to help!

### **Holistic Education: Creating New Models of Pedagogy for Thriving**

Holistic education is an education of meaning. Rather than merely educating individuals, our purpose is for all humans—all of life—to benefit, to thrive. Towards this end, I believe that many holistic educators intended to work with the public school population, but felt forced to serve in private schools, where the pedagogical models were more congruent with their values and beliefs.

I can tell my own story as an example. After many years as a public school educator, I was faced with an ethical dilemma. I believed in the egalitarian ideal of public schools, but I couldn’t abide by the traditional pedagogical model in public education that appeared more damaging to children than helpful. I ended up transitioning to a delightful private school called Rainbow Community School, whose Seven Domains holistic model of education placed the spiritual dimension of education at the center of our pedagogy. Clearly, Rainbow’s model of education would not be accepted in public school. Therefore, like many holistic educators who share a deep desire to make a positive difference in public education, I settled for the hope that our “insights and innovations of our holistic ed model” (See Carberry’s article in this issue) would influence public schools, since I wasn’t directly influencing them. (This was also the goal of public charter schools. By giving charter schools more freedom from governmental constraints, they were to develop new models of education.)

In this regard, I appreciate Carberry’s quote from Buckminster Fuller: “You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.” We holistic educators—from private schools, charter schools, and the like—have done the work of building new models.

Now, if we are to make the existing model of traditional public school “obsolete,” we have to ensure that what we

have to offer toward a public school holistic revolution is relevant to a public school population and circumstances.

### Examining a “pedagogy of privilege”

As Michael Carberry states in his article, “It’s important to acknowledge the immense privilege inherent in the private school model.” Arguably, holistic private schools exist in “bubbles,” where we may say that our goal is to work toward social justice, but we have the privilege to retreat into our bubbles and complicitly participate in a system of white supremacy when the work requires too much sacrifice, struggle, or messy conflict.

For example, I have talked to many holistic educators who fear that issues of social justice are not developmentally appropriate for young children, and they want to “protect” children from such discussions. Yet children of color do not have the privilege to be “protected.” They are exposed to, and suffer from, the consequences of negative bias and inequities from the very beginning of their lives. Developmentally, by the age of four, children of color are aware of their lower racial status in the United States, and they often express a desire to be white or have white, middle class characteristics. This is a reality we cannot ignore.

Again, I can demonstrate by recounting my own experiences at Rainbow Community School. We naively assumed that our holistic style of education—which is designed to promote the development of highly conscious, loving humans—would naturally create a culture that was inclusive. But when we tripled our financial aid and began an affirmative action campaign, we quickly, painfully discovered that our curriculum was Eurocentric, our white, middle class students and families were biased (as all humans are), and our students and families of color experienced constant micro-aggressions and a chronically stressful environment. It took years of a concerted effort and dedicated resources to decolonize our curriculum and to build a culture that was safe enough and supportive for Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) and people who were not from middle class backgrounds.

This is one example of how holistic educators must support one another in recognizing and remembering that as long as there is injustice in the world, we have to directly, head-on confront issues of social justice and inequity to make a difference for students. To provide pathways to whole human development and equity for all children and adults, we must be critically oriented to the world and to ourselves.

### The Invitation

With that, we editors of *HER* invite “diverse and emergent holistic educators,” as our mission reads, to submit articles. *HER* provides an opportunity—a venue—for our holistic community to engage in the self-evaluative, reflective, and critical work we must do to play a relevant role in a public school holistic movement.

We also invite those who have long been a part of this community to contribute to the critical conversation we have begun, such as those by Four Arrows and Debbie Millon, and to boldly, and respectively, critique and examine our own assumptions and privileges. As editors, our hope is to create a dialogue on the pages of *HER* that “calls-in” our practices and calls out for justice.

Paulo Friere’s words from many decades ago are still true today: “The emphasis now, in the transition of revolution, is to create an education that enlarges and amplifies the horizon of critical understanding of the people, and to create an education devoted to freedom” (Horton, et. al. 1990, p. 219). Holistic education is an education devoted to freedom. Our “revolution” is to ensure it is for freedom of all individuals. As Fannie Lou Hamer famously said, “Nobody’s free until everybody’s free.”

It’s an exciting time to be in education. Public, private, charter, international, or other, we have an opportunity to inspire educators everywhere to embrace their inner longing for an education of liberation and aliveness. Together, with you, we hope to make our schools places “where paradise can be created” (hooks, 1994). Thank you for being a part of this brave journey with *HER*.

With love,

Dr. Renee Owen  
On behalf of the *HER* Editors

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