

Whiteness and Race Matter in Holistic Education

Debbie Millon

E-mail: peshamillon@gmail.com

Received March 2021

Accepted for publication March 2021

Published May 2021

Abstract

Debbie Millon has worked for two decades as a Head of School in two different independent holistic/progressive K-8 schools. Her background and training is steeped in the theories, writing, and mentorship of those scholars who are considered to be among the pantheon of holistic education. Recently her leadership has entered a new chapter and extended well beyond her own school. She has shifted her focus towards leading colleagues and other educators to critically reflect upon issues related to race, equity, privilege and the imperative to de-center whiteness in the fields of progressive and holistic education. Here, Debbie shares some of her thoughts and experiences in doing this important work and concludes that “a holistic education approach that ignores whiteness and racism will be perceived as uninformed, if not irrelevant and racist...we need to be responsive to the ‘needs of evolving human beings’ and an evolving, aching society.”

Keywords: holistic education, decolonizing education, social justice, systemic racism

A shortfall

I stood in silence as my office door closed. Troy’s parents had notified me that they would not be re-enrolling him in our school and, after a brief recognition of the difficult decision and an exchange of gratitude for the years we partnered on his educational journey, they walked out. Moments earlier, my heart ached as I listened to the careful reasoning behind their decision. It was evident that their family’s deep alignment with the core principles of our holistic philosophy wasn’t sufficient to overcome something that seemed to be lacking in the approach.

Troy had been a student at our school for six years, since Kindergarten. His narrative reports and portfolios demonstrated his passion for building and construction, his natural leadership skills and ability to make friends, and his advancing writing and reading comprehension. Troy often walked through the halls with his face in a book, yet he looked up with care and a greeting when he encountered someone. During outside time, if he wasn’t playing football or soccer, he could be found socializing or exploring the area under the evergreen trees. Through our educational approach, Troy’s unique gifts and strengths were drawn forth and celebrated, his areas of challenge were supported, and his voice, interests, and inquiry were centered in the emergent curriculum. Our teachers “met him” where he was and

nurtured his inner and outer learning journey and relationships from there. He had agency in his learning and was an advocate for others in the classroom and beyond. Troy seemed to be thriving at our school. What was it that his parents felt was missing?

Troy was one of only a few Black students at our school for nearly the entire time he was enrolled. He was often the only child of color in his classroom. His family was one of only three Black families. How had our mostly white community -- and whiteness culture -- played a role in his sense of self and community, his racialized identity, and, ultimately, in his family’s decision to withdraw.

Our teachers and students co-create environments that respect and celebrate diversity, and ensure a sense of belonging; spaces where all people feel included. Surely Troy’s learning journey at our school had honored his identity, race, culture, and background. Surely, he was seen and his potential as a whole person nourished in an environment that balanced linear thinking and intuition, relationship between mind and body, relationship among subjects, relationship between self and community, and connection to earth and to self (Miller J., 2006, p. 103). Yet, in the end, our holistic approach hadn’t been sensitive enough to Troy’s experience and needs as an African American. Our holistic school didn’t give grades or

traditional assessments, but rather a written narrative report. And, while these narrative reports were beautiful, authentic stories of the child, they weren't sufficient, Troy's parents claimed. Future teachers, and sadly many others, would judge their son first by his skin color; in a system of whiteness, he already had "the mountain of racism" to climb and he needed more.

In my mind flashed other families and teachers of color who had left our school. They expressed a sense of love and connection with the philosophy but a frustration with the lack of racial diversity and sense of exclusion. Faces of former teachers who identified as white came to mind too.

How had our school and its structures supported Troy and his family? Failed them? What needed to change? And what was the first step?

Begin with identity

As we work to advance holistic education and create a more just world, it's important to begin with self and recognize how our identity influences how we see, experience, and understand the world, and how it impacts our emotions and interactions (Aguilar, 2018, p. 207). Therefore, prior to sharing my initial exploration of the questions above, I want to provide more about myself and the identity from which I speak.

I was born in western Pennsylvania in the early 1970s to two white parents. We lived a comfortable, upper middle-class life on a cul-de-sac in a mostly white neighborhood. My childhood was characterized by very little racial diversity. In elementary and middle school, I learned alongside a very small percentage of classmates who were Indian-American and Pakistan-American; there were no Black students. In high school, I graduated with 330 other students and only three classmates identified as Black.

In my professional and adult life, I've grown keenly aware of my race and the privilege I have and have had throughout my life. I'm aware that the system of whiteness benefits me and that I've encountered very little marginalization. Most of my identity markers fall within the dominant group and I am therefore afforded more grace and acceptance, less skepticism and doubt. I'm not often asked to assimilate into group norms and dynamics, and it's not assumed that, when I speak, I'm speaking for the entire race of white people. I've grown to see how our lives are saturated by the dominant culture of whiteness -- it's "the water in which we swim". For those of us who belong to the dominant culture, whiteness can be invisible and provides a list of advantages, both significant and minor; for others not in the dominant group, whiteness is very much seen and felt, oppressive and harming (Tochluk, 2010, p. 11).

As a leader in PreK-12 education for nineteen years, I've held countless conversations with parents and caregivers wishing for their child's innate wisdom and love of learning to be nurtured; with teachers who, "with a special light in their eyes", (Rocha, 2003, p.155) nurture the children's natural unfolding by providing the nourishments needed at each developmental stage (Luvmour, 2006, p.8-10); and with leaders in education dedicated to social justice and equity in their schools -- envisioning ways to bring these forward. I've been buoyed again and again by the heartfelt, selfless acts of children, who are curious about differences and seek to understand and connect across them.

This is the story and identity from which I write. My experiences of learning more about race and racism do not mean that I know what it's like to be a person of color. I cannot write from that knowledge. I felt several hesitations while writing this essay but, in the end, the pull to be vulnerable and honest, in the interest of greater social transformation, was greater than my worry about making a mistake. Please forgive me if I cause you harm as I share and reflect. I am aware that I have many blind spots, biases, and limitations and that I am still transforming my mindset and practices. I hope you'll forgive me when I fall short.

While I've grown to be a better witness of whiteness and its dominance, I know it's a lifelong journey. I may not have created these structures, but to passively exist in them only supports the status quo. I have much to learn, much to unlearn, and a responsibility to use my privilege to upend systems that don't serve everyone equitably. I've committed to becoming more race-conscious, to naming the issues, and to inviting others into the work.

Importance of language

Education discourse and language have functioned as cultural tools to maintain hierarchies in social and class relationships (Rios, 2018, p. 11). Words convey tremendous power, and language can either help us clarify problems and build unity or they can cause great harm. In order to reimagine a different future and build a more humane, equitable, and just society, we need to examine closely the words we use.

The intent of this essay is not to do a deep dive into the meaning of racism, whiteness, or systemic oppression. There are numerous resources that expand on these (Aguilar, 2020; Tatum, 2017; Tochluk, 2010) and how these systems manifest in access to opportunities, internalized racism, deficit mindsets, and criminalization of student behavior (Aguilar, 2020, pp. 88-96; Delpit, 1995, pp. 167-183). This essay is not meant to be a comprehensive review of holistic education either. Rather, I will offer a few

key definitions that frame my reflections and ground us in a shared understanding.

Whiteness is a social construction that has created a racial hierarchy that has shaped all the social, cultural, political, educational, and economic institutions of society. Whiteness is linked to domination and is a form of race privilege often invisible to white people who are not conscious of its power (Aguilar, 2020, p. 375).

White supremacy is the ideology that white people are superior. It manifests itself in a myriad of forms and affects the lives of everyone in the world (Aguilar, 2020, p. 79).

Racism is a system of oppression that emerges from beliefs that one race is superior to another based on biological characteristics. Racism is fueled by the ideology of white supremacy, which designates white people as superior to people of color (Aguilar, 2020, p. 375). Forms of racism include individual racism, structural/institutional racism, and systemic racism. In racist systems, beliefs, attitudes, actions, and structures oppress, exclude, limit, and discriminate against individuals and groups. All white people, intentionally or unintentionally, benefit from racism (Tatum, 2017, p. 91).

Implicit bias is a hidden or unintentional preference for a particular group based on social identity such as race, gender, class, ability, or sexual orientation. It's a form of prejudice that is indirectly expressed, originating in the unconscious mind. Implicit biases grow out of normal and necessary functions of the human brain and are critical to how we perceive, categorize, remember, and learn about the world around us (Choudhury, 2015, p. 49). Strategies can help people grow aware of and reduce their implicit biases so as not to cause harm from acting from them unconsciously.

Schools as agents

These definitions offer a wide lens for examining the inextricable connection between how a society educates their children and that society's vision and values. If our vision is a more just and humane world, then what needs to be happening in our schools in order for them to be agents of this vision? The wide lens asks us to look beyond the daily practices to the greater, and oftentimes invisible, systems at play in schools including those at the unconscious level. Doing this can be complicated, as each of us has been socialized into the dominant norms. The cost of not doing it, though, is too great.

The awareness of educators matters well before they step into a classroom. For starters, educators need to be aware of the larger systems of racism and whiteness that pervade all of our schools -- large, small, public, private, rural, urban. In

order to disrupt systems of oppression, educators need to understand how these were created and what supports their ongoing existence, so as not to bypass the ways history has impacted the present day realities we experience. Teacher preparation programs rarely feature racism and whiteness in their curricula which can lead to a dangerous predicament -- when knowledge is lacking, stereotypes and biases quickly fill the gaps (Locke and Getachew, 2019, p. 131).

Educators also need self-awareness, to critically examine themselves "as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory (Gramsci and Hoare, 1971, p. 628)." Without investigating and taking responsibility for our social conditioning and implicit biases, we risk doing more harm when addressing behavior, learning, interactions, decision-making, and relationships. Many holistic education theorists and practitioners have emphasized the importance of the quality of being of teachers. "Who the teacher is and the kind of relationships they are able to establish with students is one of the most, if not the most, important factor for an effective education (Rocha, 2003, p. 162)". Attending to their "quality of being" includes cultivating a deep and ongoing awareness of their identity, conditioning, and biases.

If holistic schools and holistic education are agents of society, how do our schools operate in such challenging, harmful, and divisive times? Howard Zinn, historian, educator, activist, and author of *The People's History of the United States*, argued that teaching and politics are inextricable. In an interview with Amy Goodman, Zinn explains, "I don't believe it's possible to be neutral. The world is already moving in certain directions. And to be neutral, to be passive in a situation like that is to collaborate with whatever is going on. And I, as a teacher, do not want to be a collaborator with whatever is happening in the world. I want myself, as a teacher, and I want you as students, to intercede with whatever is happening in the world (Democracy Now, 2005)."

Holistic education, whiteness and race consciousness

I recall the deep resonance I felt the first time I explored and experienced holistic education.

I devoured books and articles by Ron Miller, Phil Gang, Rachel Kessler, Jack Miller, Ba Luvmour, and Ramon Gallegos Nava, to name a few, and beamed hearing about teachers and children co-constructing learning together, honoring each person as a whole being and part of a larger interdependent whole, and the careful regard to emotional, cognitive, spiritual, social, and physical realms. The language and philosophy spoke to my heart. As the leader of a holistic school, I experienced our school as a "living

organism” that celebrated experience, reflection, and partnerships with families and the greater community; a place of love, collaboration, and flexible structures, with a participatory democratic process underlying it all (Clark, 1993, p. 83). It was aligned with human developmental theory and with the natural world. Holistic education, I was sure, could heal and rebuild our fragmented, mechanistic society.

What I wasn’t taking into consideration was the lens through which I was feeling this. My own race, identity, conditioning, and biases were factors in why this philosophy resonated so deeply with me. With a growing race-consciousness and awareness of whiteness, I began questioning whether and how contemporary holistic education theory, including in teacher preparation programs, had taken into consideration systemic racism and whiteness culture. I began examining ways that certain practices and policies might be upholding systems of oppression, disproportionately affecting students and families of color, and unintentionally reproducing the status quo -- the dominant culture of whiteness.

Interested in where holistic education intersected with racism and whiteness, I searched and found not even a handful of publications. It appeared that holistic education in the United States had yet to incorporate a race-consciousness. This didn’t come as a surprise, though. With the exception of movements initiated by people of color, nearly all social movements in the US in the last century started out virtually all-white and failed to engage issues of race, particularly in their early decades (Davis, 2019, p. 36). By engaging issues of race across race, though, social movements such as the women’s movement and the victim rights movement grew to have broader and more inclusive impacts.

My questioning had been affirmed while meeting with Troy’s parents. The emotions I felt were familiar. I had felt them other times, either in a school setting where I noted a lack of training on implicit bias and a larger number of students of color being asked to leave the classroom, while conversing with a mostly-white staff who at times spoke with a deficit mindset about students from marginalized populations, or even at a conference of holistic educators, where most attendees identified as white. In theory, holistic education is truly inclusive -- “the principle of holism, rather than reductionism. Means that we never lose sight of the fundamental interconnectedness of all phenomena... (There are) five levels of holistic interpretation: the person, the community, the society, the planet and the cosmos.” (Miller, R., 2000, p. 22-23). Race has surely been included in holistic education’s vision. Recognizing and welcoming the cultural identity of each family is a core piece of our philosophy.

Yet, in the midst of the beauty, healing, and wholeness of this approach, I was hearing that aspects of it felt exclusionary to people of color. Due to the dominance of whiteness, students and educators of color expressed that they didn’t see themselves reflected in the programs, policies, and practices - and therefore in the community.

The “early decades” of holistic education have passed. Today’s schools -- both public and private -- were founded in the dominant culture of whiteness, and it’s time we do the explicit, deliberate work to notice, name, and remove the harmful remnants of it.

A starting place

We know that holistic education is a living philosophy and process. It has evolved and continues to evolve. Our collective wisdom tells us this. Evolving doesn’t mean that we discount past ideas and the body of knowledge we have built -- but acknowledges that, because wisdom itself is an evolving process involving learning and transformation, it must always be about the process of absorbing the new and emerging ideas as well as the needs of society (Rios, 2018, p. 56).

In the fall of 2019, at the Progressive Education Network conference, I led a workshop titled *Is Progressive Education Racist: How to have this conversation in our schools*. In it, participants examined the troubling whiteness and structural racism in progressive and holistic education practices and policies, and initiated individual and school action plans to begin to address it. We highlighted the importance of doing the internal work of transforming self while transforming relationships within the school, using a race equity lens. It was a starting place, and it generated uncomfortable but important conversations. One participant shared that she hoped to initiate a conversation like this in her school and to ask the Head of School to ensure implicit biases and whiteness were woven into the professional development plan. Another participant expressed frustration that whiteness culture often prompts educators to look at “the self” first; in his life, community and relationships were always first.

Amidst the discourse and discomfort, something remarkable began to emerge. There we were -- we, who dedicated our lives to education and social transformation, at a conference about advancing our beloved philosophy of education, acknowledging collectively that something was, well, lacking in the approach. It was far from cognitive dissonance. It was awareness and acceptance, and a readiness to act.

From a growing awareness, schools and educators can start to examine where dominant whiteness shows up so they can act to de-center it. Beginning with the inner genius of the child won’t be enough to overcome and dismantle the greater

systems of whiteness and racism within which school exists. This work is larger than the people and the practices in the classroom. As such, an action plan requires a deep analysis of the structures and systems within the school too. From hiring, onboarding, and training, to school policies, protocols, and language, and to developing alliances and partnerships with communities of color, an action plan needs to ensure that schools are abolishing what doesn't serve the greater vision and amplifying what does. It's not a linear process either, and each step informs the next.

It's my hope that, as a starting place, we normalize conversations around whiteness, race, implicit bias, and identity and, therefore, normalize the discomfort and continue moving forward together. It's going to involve discomfort but also deep courage, and compassion, which we can nourish in ourselves and one another along the way.

Evolving together

In his momentous article, *Holistic Education: A Brief Introduction*, Ron Miller said:

Holistic education is based on the premise that each person finds identity, meaning, and purpose in life through connections to the community, to the natural world, and to spiritual values such as compassion and peace. ... There is no one best way to accomplish this goal, there are many paths of learning and the holistic educator values them all; what is appropriate for some children, in some situations, in some historical and social contexts, may not be best for others. The art of holistic education lies in its responsiveness to the diverse learning styles and needs of evolving human beings. (Miller, R., 2000)

While there is no "one best way to accomplish this goal," whiteness plays a role in holistic education. Given the nation's changing demographics and persistent, pernicious, if not deepening, racial disparities, a holistic education approach that ignores whiteness and racism will be perceived as uninformed, if not irrelevant and racist. We practitioners and theorists need to become more skillful at identifying, navigating, and transforming the harmful impacts of whiteness and racism; we need to be responsive to the "needs of evolving human beings" and an evolving, aching society.

I invite the holistic education community to consider how we might engage and evolve. Holistic education expresses that each person has unique potential and gifts to offer. How does this idea manifest for people outside the scope of mainstream culture, for people of color? How are everyone's stories and experiences included -- or overlooked?

I invite us to include new voices around the table, and to ensure everyone sees themselves in the theory and practice.

Let's remove whiteness from the center. Let's intentionally amplify and center voices of people of color. Let's push bravely forward, put leadership and purpose into the hands of a more diverse group of people, and allow for the emergence of a new vision. Let's not be neutral.

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