

Holistic education and systems change: Transcript from live panel discussion, March 12, 2021

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Abstract

This transcript is from a live panel discussion held on March 12, 2021 on the topic of Holistic education and systems change. The recording is available at <https://youtu.be/82mm7Pyq17s>.

Keywords: Holistic education, systems change, patterns, interconnectedness of living beings, the web of life

Hello from Systems Change Alliance representative Carolina Carvalho. Systems Change Alliance (<https://systemschangealliance.org/what-we-do/>) is an initiative working to bring together people to bring about all-round systems change. We firmly believe that change is already happening in places all around the world and in our series, we are talking to people already leading change. We welcome: Vanessa Aires, Stephanie Nestlerode, and Sheryl Morris.

Introductions:

Vanessa Aires has a background in developmental psychology. She is a regenerative entrepreneur, cofounder of a Keti Keta (<https://www.ketiketa.pt>) focusing on reconnecting adults and children to nature.

Stephanie Nestlerode is a social worker by training and a strategic planner with forty years of experience, coaching coalitions. She helps people learn to generate energy, ownership, and structure necessary for strategic thinking. She is the chief synthesizer of Seventh Generation Labs (<https://www.7thgenerationlabs.com/great-hoop-of-life-gatherings>).

Sheryl Morris has systems thinking informing her work. She follows holistic education as a whole helping to highlight

several at Pedagogical Paradigms

(<https://www.facebook.com/groups/243028889465852/about>) online connecting people and ideas. She is living self-directed learning and she is passionate about holding space for people of color (global majority) bringing them in holistic education and bringing their voices to the picture.

Carolina Carvalho is a network ecologist from Portugal who researches the interconnectedness of living beings and how we might apply this knowledge to help the human species live harmoniously within the web of life. She has a master's degree in Natural Resource Management and Conservation and works as a researcher at the University of Lisbon's Higher Institute of Agronomy. She is also part of an association for transition, Live with Earth, working for the spread of knowledge about sustainable alternatives in Portugal. Her areas of interest include permaculture, programming, languages and eastern philosophies.

Carolina:

What is holistic education? Why were you drawn to this mission? How does it relate to your work?

Sheryl:

Holistic education defined simply is about educating the mind, body, and spirit (Miller, n.d.). Just as it is used in medicine, the term "holistic" takes into account social

factors. Key addition to definition: Respectful regard for the child and the human potential within. Little to no competition. I was drawn into holistic education through Montessori. Since leaving the classroom I have remained connected to/ interested in developments. We can learn about Montessori being folded into elder care, the public sector, Social Justice, and now Sociocracy.

My focus has since opened and expanded and the internet has been a key source for me to relate to other educators, borrow from their libraries, and listen to their podcasts. Pedagogical Paradigms is a Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/243028889465852/about>) where I help share a collection of pedagogical paradigms.

Stephanie:

Both of my children went to a Montessori School. When I think of holistic education I think of Montessori. “How do children learn?” She watched children. I’m a kinesthetic learner. She blows me away because she has these materials from which people learn. The spirit of the child and of the caretakers is important. I read how very important it is for the guide to be grounded so that she can be fully tuned into the child. This isn’t happening in our current educational system. We don’t take care of the caretakers, yet they are to be caring and nurturing to all the others. Nurses, teachers; it’s not a coincidence a lot of these are women.

Vanessa:

I really appreciate that we must take care of the caregivers. Integrity of mind, body, spirit; all dimensions of self. Teachers, children, and parents; so important that we include parents. Everyone giving, all adults who are providing, we must nurture our own inner child. Here in Portugal, we are forgetting this. As a psychologist I studied scientifically-based and classical-based psychology; spirit was not included. It is critical and we are forgetting—we are whole beings, mind, body, and spirit.

Carolina:

What patterns or values would you like to change? For example, I come from a background of permaculture, we tend to look at patterns first. Some very visible patterns are parallel lines, children are always facing forward, and there is an absence of circles.

Sheryl:

Observable patterns and values appear rigid: teaching to a set curriculum, overemphasis on one or two subjects and way

too much testing. I would replace this with “free inquiry” within a new culture—a culture of learning. Reading from a new favorite book— James Moffett’s *The Universal Schoolhouse: Spiritual Awakening Through Education*: “Each community should organize a totally individualized, far-flung learning network giving all people of all ages access to any learning resource at any time. Nothing is required, but everything is made available. Users make the decisions but avail themselves of constant counseling by a variety of parties. The very concept of schools, classes, courses, exams, and curriculum is superseded. Subjects and methods are reorganized around individual learners forging their personal curricula in interaction with others doing the same across a whole spectrum of learning sites, situations, and technologies. This is what I am calling the universal schoolhouse.”

Stephanie:

I support everything said. And, what you brought up too, Carolina, in terms of the circle. Life is shaped in circles not in straight lines.

The organizational consulting, I do makes plain this primary focus on efficiency, not effectiveness. If we’re not dealing with the whole of a child, we aren’t being effective. What’s the right thing, efficiency or effectiveness? The statistician Dr. Deming (Stockton, n.d.) said you need to be doing the right thing at the right time with the right people for the right reason. He understood that for statistical process control, ultimately, all the data known and worth knowing are actually unknowable. The data you’d want to have you’re never going to have because you’re into the mystery.

If I had my preference school would be an interactive process totally focused on each child understanding what they had passion for and what their unique contribution would be. Their entire program would be focused on learning that.

In Indigenous culture, the Iroquois gave each child a learning name at age three. They witnessed how they learned and then they gave them a learning name that reflected them so other people knew how to share with them. There was also an expectation to serve the community; their education also focused on what they planned to contribute to the community. Sadly, I think our children can’t really understand the point of their education because they can’t link it to anything on the inside of them. That is missing.

Vanessa:

I resonate a lot with the sharings. My own work is based on permaculture principles, and we are trying to adapt or integrate permaculture ethics and principles into designing education, into pedagogic application on the practical level on a daily basis.

Maybe what is happening nowadays in education, at least the ones I'm familiar with, which in Portugal, Italy, and Nepal are these straight lines and lack of looking to the children and really being fluid. This rigidity in education worsens the exact thing that Stephanie was sharing about lacking links to anything on the inside of them.

Educational professionals are coming with a written agenda before getting to know the child, before getting to know the human in front of them. There is this fixed agenda which is not taking into consideration the individuality of every child nor the individuality of the educators, the caregivers. This would be the same as going to start our garden and deciding, "I will want to have these eggplants because I love to eat them and maybe we would grab tomatoes and papaya and some summer fruits and put them in the ground maybe in Switzerland on the Alps in the middle of winter; nothing will grow!"

It's not about me deciding alone in my office that this must be learned or that the kids must know, this with the focus that they will become something which I also decided or that the capitalist system decided will be the top profession. For me this pattern of bringing a built agenda and the teacher delivering it should be transformed to an openness to the child.

Soft skills are necessary, abilities to recognize emotions and cope with them. My focus as the educator along with the kids and their parents is to recognize emotions and build capacity to cope with them. We want to learn to correlate with each other, how to cooperate because there's also this pattern, nowadays, of competition. This is not what nature does. If we mimic nature more, we will start cooperating more. If we can build capacity with soft skills in education today, I believe that this will change the future.

Nobody knows what the future will bring. When I was studying everyone was telling me that psychology will bring me to unemployment here in Portugal. Now with this big crisis everyone will need a psychologist. We will continue as human beings; humans have feelings and humans relate to

nature. We are nature! If we don't learn fast to be natural in a natural way, I think that it will be very hard to keep going.

Carolina:

One other thing that has been popping up in conversations recently is how there is a prevalence, also a bit of fear that if you don't have a good grade something bad will happen to you; if you don't behave in this way something bad will happen to you. We sometimes forget to look at the educators and sometimes they are afraid, too. They can be restrained by rigid curriculums, they can be afraid of the questions that the kids may ask, and sometimes they have to admit that they don't know the answers to all the questions that people may ask in the world.

What are some things that you think are missing, like some topics that are very important that no one is teaching in mainstream schools? For example, I've been talking to people in India a lot about this, they have no idea how important food is to your health and what kind of things are healthy or not, I think in the US this is also a pattern. And regarding lifestyle, in India, for example, there is this huge tradition of Ayurveda but none of this is taught, like how everything that surrounds you relates to your health. I think this is really important and it's missing. I would like to hear your thoughts on what important things are missing.

Sheryl:

Addressing those things that are missing in education—Values. John Creger (n.d.) wrote, "If you become wise, accumulate values; your wisdom depends on the values you choose and the courageous loyalty you bring to owning and developing them throughout your life." Early in childhood learning about feelings is a stepping stone to establishing your values when you are older. More to be included are democratic communication and conflict resolution, sociocracy, social justice, and true history; outdoor work and play in natural settings, cosmic education, and philosophy. Philosophy, it has been said, "the love of wisdom," begins with wonder about the world. It is one of the oldest academic disciplines, but traditionally it has not been considered a subject for children. Yet young people ask philosophical questions and are curious about philosophical issues: How do we know things? What is beauty? How are the mind and body connected? Young people do not need to learn philosophy; it is something they do."

Stephanie:

In Indigenous traditions that I study, sacred learning is the most sacred activity that they have. Fortunately, for me while getting my masters for social work we were told, “We really can’t teach you everything you’re going to need to know your entire career so we’re going to focus on helping you learn how to learn.” I think that that as a paramount competency is just huge because we have to learn our way in the future. If we don’t have the skills to change with changing circumstances, it’s going to be very difficult. Natives learned as they lived and held a question, “Why is it that nature can get along so well and we continue to war with each other?” The “aha” moment they had 800 years ago was, “You know what? We need to study nature! Nature seems to have something figured out that we don’t!” And after years of studying nature, they came up with what they called universal laws and principles about humility and equitable exchange and it allowed the Iroquois Confederacy to quit warring, they had been dying forever. In some ways we are not being human enough; we’ve taken the human being out of the equation. But, on the flip side we’re too human-centric; we don’t consider the rights of nature. In the native wisdoms, Mother Earth had rights, herself, and so did all the women, and so did all the children. In our history we’ve forgotten this.

One last point—The odds of being born a human being are very small and from an indigenous perspective that means we have special rights and responsibilities, responsibilities for continued learning and staying in balance with ourselves, others, and nature. There is a lot of ancient wisdom that simply needs to be brought forward to help us create a new story; it will be new because our environment is very different from their environment. But these universal laws and principles of what promotes peaceful coexistence really haven’t changed in thousands of years; so, we need to focus on the practical.

Vanessa:

I relate a lot with Indigenous wisdom, and with nature. I’ve discovered these last few years the way of council in which I practice—Sociocracy. We try to slowly bring it to the children and to their families.

Regarding philosophy, I agree. It brings me to a piece of a book I am reading now from Krishnamurti (1953). It’s a great inspiration for me—that which is in regard to the inclusion of the community and the related points of which we were speaking in the beginning—bringing together more of the relationship between head, heart and hands and being

practical. It’s missing this being practical, to engage with nature, to get muddy, to get dirty. I love the words we create as humans—the kid with mud on him is a ‘dirty’ kid. I’m being ironic.

I believe what is missing, we need to dive into nature, to stare, just sit on a cliff or in a garden and just stare at nature, trying to make a bond. This can be very difficult for grown-ups. But this is why education is fundamental, to keep this connection alive because as human beings we are nature ourselves. We are born connected; we are born bonded. What the majority of the educational system is doing nowadays is to cut off this connection. We cut down trees to make the books where we draw and print pictures of trees in order to teach the kids about trees—instead of just going outdoors and showing the tree! We’re missing a lot not being in our natural habitat.

I was reading this in Clarissa Pinkola Estes’ (1994) book *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, another great reference for me. I believe that storytelling is missing in education -- but not Disney storytelling. I was lucky to be raised very close to my grandmother, my mother’s mother.

This, too, is fundamental – grandparents. We need to start to listen to elders. It’s to get back to nature, dive in, get muddy, get wet in the rain. We need to get to know each child and how they learn. Find out from them, “What is your story? Who is your mother, your father? How do you relate to the world?”

Carolina: What wonderful sharing from everyone. What are the challenges you face? Are people responsive, do they want to experience this or is there a resistance? Do you see inequality when it comes to accessing alternative education? What are other issues needing a closer look?

Sheryl:

About challenges that face holistic educators, first and foremost is white supremacy; finding and inviting all the voices we need to listen to and learn from. It’s at the top of the list. Other challenges include the disconnect between various pedagogies, not to mention even between those within or under-the- umbrella of one philosophy. The word “spirit” is often a red flag for many. It can get confused with religion. Authors who speak to the need of awakening “spirit” include Walter Wink (1999) who wrote *The Powers That Be*, James Moffett (1994) who I’ve already mentioned wrote *The Universal Schoolhouse: Spiritual Awakening*

Through Education. Also The Systems View of Life: A Unifying Vision by Capra and Luisi (2011).

Czech playwright and statesman Václav Havel (1997) wrote “It is my deep conviction that the only option is for something to change in the sphere of the spirit, in the sphere of human conscience, in the actual attitude of man towards the world and his understanding of himself and his place in the order of existence.” Getting parents and grandparents to understand what is at stake if we don’t reach for and nourish all human potential. There is a tendency to believe that school is the same for their children as it was for them and think, “That’s good enough.”

Another big challenge is the necessary funding and taxes. How do we fund all of this, and is there the will? Speaking to receptivity—yes, we can see interest in alternatives growing as well as the numbers of alternatives available; it can be hard to know from which to pick and choose. And yes, there are definitely patterns of inequality in access to alternatives. That’s why it is SO important to keep asking, “Whose voice(s) is/are missing here? Two voices in particular I want to hear more from Koren Clark (2021) a.k.a. Nubia Maat, a Montessorian, who is bringing from her lineage, her own studies of African education and spirituality. Akilah S. Richards (2017) offers much to the paths of self-directed learning.

Stephanie:

I agree that politics has become huge. Education has become such a political football at least in the U.S. What’s true and what is not true? What’s appropriate? What’s important? How are we going to pay for it? There is a huge equity issue. Montessori schools typically are more expensive than a public-school option. It’s complicated even more, culturally, with the advent of computers and handheld devices. There have been studies done among young mothers who because of working demands in a stressful economy; while trying to cook dinner and otherwise manage their households; children are very attracted to gadgets that young people love to hang on to. Studies have shown that when you put an iPad in a crib with a young child when you come back to that child at age one and ask them to choose between their mother and the iPad 100 percent of them chose the iPad! That is very scary! When my own children were in school, Montessorians didn’t believe young kids should ever have a computer until grade school because they wanted them to stay experiential and not distracted. They didn’t like Sesame Street; they said we’re

training a whole generation of children to have less than a 30 second attention span.

We’re in a culture very different than indigenous cultures where when a child misbehaved they had a song, the child’s song. Their theory of practice was that the child had forgotten who they truly were and so they would put the child in the middle of a circle and the whole community would sing their song to help them remember who they really were. That is a very different approach to anything we have now. There are police in the schools as a standard practice.

Culturally we’re all at odds with “wholeness.” When we see systems all around us falling apart, I think we at the local level have to be more prepared to self-organize and figure out a way between parents and interested people to make things work. There is such tumult and the politics for teachers is so challenging. I have to give a shout out to teachers because they have many masters; parents want them to be miracle workers and principals want them to follow a certain pedagogy for which they paid big dollars. We need to think for the long term and listen to all voices; we’re in challenging times where we all have to learn our way through it together.

Vanessa:

I agree with everything and, “Educators listen to everybody.” It’s echoing on me. I also share this challenge regarding politics. Here in Portugal there is no legal framework to have a school project outdoors such as ours. There’s the community for Waldorf schools and this is already okay, or a Montessori. I also faced community-voice or societal-voice of many parents wanting a different education, alternatives. They march against the system because it is meant to be one system for every child. More than one model is needed. We should consider each child differently and a wider umbrella is needed where projects with different approaches can actually exist. We had to reframe around the law all over to be able to exist and to offer this possibility to the parents and the educators that were looking for it.

I always try to ask these questions of the educators I work with, “What is the education you believe in? What is your dream?”

We also include multidisciplinary facilitators: artistes, painters, dancers, not having only educators or teachers teaching something. Having people from different backgrounds is very important. It’s a challenge when we just

have teachers that come from one pedagogical school or educators that just come from the early-ages-education school, the psychology is the same. When we have people that have had the same educational background providing education, being disruptive is very difficult. All the techniques learned in school or university are based on an obsolete paradigm of education. So the legal framework and the education of the facilitators or the caregivers must be transformed.

I agree and emphasize culture as a big challenge. The Portuguese which is a story of a very conservative approach to everything; we had a dictatorship until very recently. The generation of parents having children now, more or less my generation, were raised by parents that had very limited access to possibilities to study because the majority of their families had no money to put them in university and many other reasons. We were trained or we were educated by parents that if you don't go to university and get a degree you are considered a nobody; you can't do anything. The professions like the artisans or the practical workers that don't have the doctor on the back of their name, this means nothing.

When these projects like ours emerge/pop-up, the typical comments and questions parents have are, "OK, they go outdoors with you until they are six years old but, then after they go to primary school how do they do? What have they learned? How do you teach numbers? How do you teach letters?" We don't! It's not supposed to be for children to learn letters or numbers on a forced basis before 7, 8, or 10 years old even. This is a curiosity that comes instinctively from the kids, there's no worry about it. But this is very difficult at least in our culture to make a father or a mother trust us when we say this. Even if we are trained psychologists and educators and pedagogues. If they go to the doctor and ask something regarding their physical health they would believe it because it's a doctor; when it's an educator, a pedagogical psychologist, nobody believes. They need the one in two and three in and a thousand studies scientifically proven for these to become fact.

Carolina:

There sure seem to be a lot of challenges around this issue. One of the last things mentioned was culture. One of the main promises of education is to help shape the culture of future generations and our systems have their foundations in our cultures, so what do you see as being the strengths of

holistic education and how can it really contribute towards systems change?

Sheryl:

The prominent systems-thinker Peter Senge (2011), answers this "... a culture dedicated to learning would devote its resources to those institutions that most shape our development as learners. They might or might not resemble the schools we have today: But they would be places where everyone, young and old, would continuously develop and grow in each other's company; they would be incubation sites for continuous change and growth. If we want the world to improve, in other words, then we need schools that learn."

"Can schooling transform society? James Moffett (1999) asks, arguing that "it can, if we look beyond the traditional view of education as a means to finding jobs or getting ahead, and we attend to the personal development and enrichment of the whole child."

"What is the role of holistic education in achieving systems change?"

Given our earlier definitions of holistic education and using described tools of a system thinker, we need to find the ways to build relationships between one philosophy or theory and another. Rather than being disconnected we need to become interconnected; rather than working in silos we need to share and work together for the emergence of something new. We all need to work together and look to all other holistic pedagogies for community in order to share and promote as an alliance or a coalition. Leyla Acaroglu (2017) proposes 6 tools for systems change.

Stephanie:

There's indigenous wisdom that says everything that enables disables also, and everything that disables enables also, so while systems thinking enables so many things at some point it can become disabling because you just get overwhelmed. Given my age I've figured out that the only workaround to that is to realize what I'm responsible for, what I was brought into this world to do. The mission of Seventh Generation Labs (<https://www.7thgenerationlabs.com/great-hoop-of-life-gathe-rings>) is igniting the ability of individuals, organizations, and communities to both know and bring forward their unique contribution for the common good. That's where I'm focusing, doing my one little part in the universe to make these wisdoms widely available. I have to believe I can't be

the person with my finger in the dike to save it all. I am responsible for doing what I'm called to do and helping other people do the same. We'll see how it all lands.

Vanessa:

Yes, and you just recalled me to my mission to reconnect humans to nature, to their nature; this is what I'm focused on. Nature is itself a system. Speaking of patterns, one pattern I really like and find correlating is a fractal. The fractal is a pattern that perhaps a holistic education can bring the thought or the invitation to be more as a fractal or feel as a fractal. If we feel our connection to nature, I believe we will more and more mimic nature. As the forest is all connected and interconnected; all the mycelium connects everything.

I believe deeply that all of the Montessorians that are disconnected, all the elders that are disconnected, and all other methodologies that are disconnected if they connect as nature itself, we will remember what it means to be nature as humans with responsibility. There are minimum odds to becoming a human as a species. I believe through the holistic education of mind and body and spirit, we will see nature as whole and interconnected, and all of these will bring the needed systems changes be they in education or the food system.

I must reconnect with one proposal about food. It is for us to bring as holistic educators a relation with food or the circle of the food to our kids. They bake bread in the forest, they pick and bring from the garden the vegetables and then they cook their soup. So, they build a relation with their food. We have these stories of kids that at home they don't eat soup, whatsoever, and when they are at KK, they triple the dose of soup they want to eat because they cooked it! This is what holistic education can bring—an immersive connection with reality. You will need to eat all your life and now you know how to cook soup. Regarding numbers and letters, I'm not that certain, but for food there's no question. To relate with inner and outer self and with all the other species, broadly speaking in education we can prepare, and we can impact the first six years, 16 years, 18 years of kids. If we will be sure that these new generations that are coming up have grown having [a] connection with the whole human experience in the future the systems they will bring and build with new laws, changes to all of these challenges we were acknowledging will be visible.

Carolina:

This has been an amazing conversation. Since we're short on time, I would like to ask you... In one sentence what is the main change that you think that the world needs?

Sheryl:

A shift in relationships – Humankind to Mother Earth; Man to Man; Man to Woman; Adult to Child.

A shift in 'power-over' to 'power-with'. A shift from domination to partnerships (Riane Eisler, date)

Stephanie:

In general, we all need to hold noble intentions for the common good. That's how I think about it in one sentence.

Vanessa:

I believe in the reconnection with nature, it must take cooperation rather than competition.

Carolina:

Thank you. It was lovely to have you here to hear all of that you had to say. Hopefully we can continue this conversation sometime in the future.

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