

Schools Inspired by The Holistic Curriculum

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Abstract

The Holistic Curriculum, first published in 1988, and the graduate course with the same name has inspired the development of four different schools. This paper first outlines the major principles of the Holistic Curriculum-inclusion, balance and connection. It then describes each of the four schools-The Roger White Academy, The School at the Toronto Ronald MacDonald House Charity, the Equinox Holistic Alternative School, and the Selm Academy. It also mentions the possibility of another school at the Six Nations Reserve in Ontario.

Keywords: *holistic education, holistic curriculum, instruction*

I have taught a course entitled the Holistic Curriculum since 1985 and in 1988 the first edition of *The Holistic Curriculum* was published. I have continued to teach the Holistic Curriculum to over 1000 graduate students, who are mostly teachers doing graduate studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. There have been three more editions of *The Holistic Curriculum* (1996, 2007, 2019) which have been translated into Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. The book and the course have inspired four different schools. In this paper I will summarize the main principles of *The Holistic Curriculum* and then describe each of the schools.

The Holistic Curriculum

The Holistic Curriculum seeks to be in harmony with how things are. Ecology and Indigenous wisdom describe a reality that is interdependent. Everything is part of an interconnected whole. Indigenous writer, Richard Wagamese (2016) describes this interconnectedness beautifully:

I have been considering the phrase 'all my relations' for some time now. It's hugely important. It's our saving graced in the end. It points to truth that we are all related, that we are all connected, that we all belong to each other. The important word is 'all'. Not just those who look like me, sing like me, dance like me, speak like

me, pray like me or behave like me. That means every person, just as it means every rock, mineral, blade of grass, and creature. We live because everything else does. If we were to choose collectively to live that teaching, the energy of our change of consciousness would heal each of us – and the planet. (p. 36)

Unfortunately, much of education is fragmented and does not reflect this reality. Knowledge is broken down into courses, units, lessons, and bits of information. Schooling also tends to focus on individual achievement so that children see themselves as separate and unconnected. To hold a view of reality that is not in touch with the way things are creates suffering.

Holistic education has a broad set of aims. These include wisdom, compassion, wholeness/wellbeing, a sense of awe and wonder, and a sense of purpose. Wisdom is seeing deeply into the nature of things and acting on that awareness. This awareness involves recognizing the interconnectedness of things which can lead to a natural compassion for all beings. Wellbeing – physical, mental, and spiritual – is also an important goal. Bhutan's goal of Gross National Happiness (GNH) is one vision of how wellbeing and happiness can be societal aims. GNH has inspired other countries to move beyond just economic growth as the

central aim. Holistic curriculum also seeks to nurture awe, wonder and curiosity.

Finally, holistic education assists students in discovering their purpose for being here. Holistic educators believe that we are a part of something greater than ourselves which can be called the cosmic symphony. More specifically, each person has their own purpose as part of the larger story and holistic education attempts to help the students in discovering that purpose. Indigenous peoples believe each person is born with a gift or set of gifts and education should help the student develop their gifts so that they can be shared with the world. Robin Wall Kimmerer, author of *Braided Sweetgrass* (2013), writes, "Gifts of the mind, hands, heart, voice, and vision all offered up on behalf of the earth. Whatever our gift, we are called to give it and to dance for the renewal of the world" (p. 384).

The Holistic Curriculum focuses on three basic principles. One principle is to reflect on the interdependent nature of things and focus on connections.

Connections

There are six different connections in *The Holistic Curriculum*:

Subject connections. As much as possible, the holistic curriculum views knowledge as interconnected so subjects are linked in various ways. One way is multidisciplinary where the curriculum contains separate subjects but teachers in a subject connect their subject to another area of study. For example, a history teacher would bring in the art and literature of a particular historical period. Interdisciplinary curriculum is where two or three subjects are integrated around a problem or theme. For example, a unit on nonviolence could include history, philosophy, and religion. Finally, the transdisciplinary curriculum integrates several subjects around a theme that is studied for an extended period.

Community connections. Community is fundamental to the holistic curriculum. The school and classroom should be a loving community; it should be a place where students feel valued and honored as individuals. The teachers help in developing community through their care and presence. By being fully present, the teacher is attentive to students and their needs and because of this presence students feel cared for.

Community is essential to the school as a whole. Martin Luther King's concept of the "Beloved Community" is one

where there is justice and love and is a powerful vision for a school community (Andrus, 2021). Size is important here as, ideally, schools should be a size where everyone recognizes one another. A strong sense of community is recognized when students look forward to going to school and see it as place they want to be – they feel nourished there. The principal or head of the school is vital in creating community. He or she should also build connections to the surrounding community and involve parents and community in the school.

Earth Connections. Connecting to the Earth and its processes is also fundamental to holistic curriculum. As much as possible, there should be opportunities for students to have direct experience with nature. Gardens on or near the school can provide such an experience. In Korea there is the school forest movement where over 700 schools have planted a small forest on the school grounds (Kim, 2019, p. 188). Students look after the trees and also find the forest as a place where they can meditate. Reading Indigenous literature also can deepen appreciation of nature (McLuhan, 1972).

Thinking connections. This connection is what we could call 'whole brain thinking' that includes both intuition and logical thinking. Intuition is associated with right side of the brain and logical thinking with the left. The work of Iain McGilchrist (2010) has provided a broad perspective on the two sides of the brain. He argues that seeing the world from the left side of the brain contributes to fragmentation with the world "...appearing to its inhabitants as if a collection of bits and pieces apparently randomly thrown together" (p. 431). He also states, "...over history intuition has lost ground to rationality" (p. 437). Holistic education seeks to restore that lost ground and a balance between rationality and intuition. This is done with learning activities such as visualization, use of metaphor, and poetry as ways to restore the balance.

Body/Mind connections. Recent research shows the mind and body are intimately connected and that learning is facilitated by nurturing that connection (Davidson, 2012; Beilock, 2015). Mindfulness practices and yoga are used more frequently in schools to enhance this connection. Holistic education seeks to help children and adolescents be at home in their bodies.

Soul/heart connections. Holistic educators recognize and try to connect with the deepest part of the human being – the soul. Also referred to as the heart, or divine spark, this is the place where we feel most connected to ourselves, to other

life, and the universe. Many of the connections already mentioned such as the earth and community nourish the soul. A curriculum for the inner life that includes visualization, storytelling, meditation, and journal writing can also be used in classrooms (Miller, 2000, pp.49-74).

Inclusion

A second principle is inclusion. The holistic curriculum avoids labeling and stereotyping students and seeks to provide a welcoming environment where all students can participate. To reach the whole student, the holistic curriculum employs three broad approaches to teaching and learning: transmission, transaction and transformation.

Transmission is a one way imparting of information to the student by the teacher or the text. This is sometimes referred to as direct instruction.

Transaction is more interactive. It involves dialogue between teacher and student or student and student. It tends to focus on problem solving and the development of cognitive skills.

Transformation involves connecting to and nurturing the inner, imaginative life of the student. Teachers can see themselves in the student and thus feel connected to the students. Knowing and learning from a transformational perspective is non-dualistic. The knower and known become one; what we study becomes part of our being and does not remain separate. The holistic teacher will use all three of these approaches to develop a rhythm in their teaching.

For example, I start my class with loving and kindness meditation (transformation), then give a short lecture on some aspect of holistic education (transmission) and then break the class into small groups to discuss the ideas presented (transaction). The use of the three positions will vary with the subject matter, the students, and the teacher. I have discussed the three positions in more detail in *Whole Child Education* with examples from several different teachers and how they use the three positions in their own teaching. Here is one example written by Gail Phillips who works with teachers and writes about how she introduces Tribes using the three positions:

During our weekly classes I use and integrate the three positions: transmission, transaction, and transformation. At the beginning of the year, I introduced the Tribes process and four agreements of Attentive Listening, Mutual Respect, Right to pass and Appreciation/No put-downs (*transmission*). Through

small group discussions and tasks, the students had discussed the agreements and how to introduce and practice them in meaningful and integrated contexts (*transaction*). Partway through the year, I introduced the concept of a **Talking Stick**. A Talking Stick is a tool used in many First Nations' traditions at council meetings. It allows all members to present their points of view. The Talking Stick is passed from person to person and only the person holding the stick can speak. The others listen. In the circle everyone teaches and learns together. I modeled the steps to create a Talking Stick and explained how one is used (*transmission*). Students worked in grade groupings (K-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8) to discuss how Talking Sticks could be integrated into their planning not only to reinforce concepts in the Ontario curriculum but also to practice the Tribes agreements and specific social skills (*transaction*). The students then chose their materials (tree branch, colored yarn, ribbon, feathers, beads) and began to create their own Talking Stick. You could feel a quiet energy as they held the tree branch in their hands, wrapped their wool around it and added feathers, beads and ribbon. As they created their Talking Stick, I asked the students to think about two things: a song and a place that had special meaning for them. Once they had finished making their Talking Sticks, mine was passed around the circle. It was as if time had stopped. As the students held the Talking Stick, each one shared the song and the place that they had chosen. It was quickly evident that something magical was happening. The Talking Stick became a Listening Stick as each one of us gave our full attention to everyone else in turn. We listened with our ears, eyes, and hearts. We were consciously present in the moment. There were nods, tears, smiles, and hugs as people spoke and listened from the heart. We were all transported into each other's lives. Simple questions gave voice to profound stories, deepening bonds and connections (*transformation*). We were one yet it was not the Talking Stick alone that united us. It was the process that allowed each of us to develop a deeper sense of listening, wellbeing and belonging to the group.

After all of the stories had been shared, each of us placed our Talking Stick on a black cloth on the floor to create a beautiful star shape that radiated with energy and reflected the uniqueness, the wholeness and the power of the circle. (Miller, 2010, pp.58-9)

Balance

Jing Lin (2006) describes these two qualities, “*yang* is the energy that creates and motivates and *yin* is the energy that nourishes, nurtures, sustains and harmonizes. . . the balance of *yang* and *yin* preconditions the harmonious existence of nature and human beings” (p. 80). This flow of energy between the two is essential to health of the cosmos, the earth, society, and the human being. This differs from the Western view which has independent polarities (e.g., good/bad, right/wrong, success/failure) that are difficult to reconcile.

Suzuki (1970) has also written about yin and yang, “Good is not different from bad. Bad is good; good is bad. They are two sides of one coin” (p. 103). Wong (2015) writes, “People today think that independence is a desirable thing, that yin and yang should be completely separated to each maintain its own identity. . . instead of embracing the interdependency of all things” (p. 169). In contrast, the sage is in harmony with *yin* and *yang*, “In stillness she is at one with the virtue of yin; in movement she flows with the action of yang” (p. 153).

In the industrialized world education has leaned strongly towards the *yang* with its on standardized testing and the accountability movement. The curriculum tends to focus on the development of skills with little attention to the development of the imagination and creativity. Using the Tao as a guided we can try to develop a balance between *yin* and *yang* in the curriculum and the classroom.

Yang	Yin
Individual	Group
Content	Process
Knowledge	Imagination
Rational	Intuitive
Quantitative Assessment	Qualitative Assessment
Assessment/Evaluation	Instruction/Learning
Technology	Program
Techniques/Strategies	Vision

(Miller, 2019, pp.10-12)

The classroom is an energy system. The concepts of *yin* and *yang* can help maintain interest and energy in the classroom. If either *yin* or *yang* dominates the energy, or *chi*, will dissipate so the two need to be seen as complementary and in relationship. However, it is not about

maintaining a 50/50 balance, but allowing both to manifest. The teacher needs to use their intuition to know when to bring in more *yin* or more *yang* into the classroom. For example, if there has been too much teacher-directed learning (*yang*) the teacher can use small groups (*yin*) to re-energize that classroom. Similarly, if there has been an excessive focus on right brain activities such as intuitive thinking there could be a shift to more rational and logical thinking.

Four Schools

These schools have found *The Holistic Curriculum* helpful in shaping their programs. My book was not the only influence. For example, a few teachers at Equinox had backgrounds in Waldorf education which impacted how they taught. Farzaneh Peterson, who founded the Roger White Academy, used her Bahai faith to build an inclusive approach to her school. Still, people who were key to developing the programs in each of these schools have acknowledged how *The Holistic Curriculum* was important in developing their program.

Roger White Academy (2002-2018). I met Farzaneh Peterson and her husband Jeffrey when she was starting this school in Newmarket, Ontario. Here is the mission statement of the school:

Roger White Academy was a private school offering kindergarten through grade eight, founded with the mission to empower children to develop a love for learning and to enable them to develop their full potential as noble human beings. Teaching methods focused on promoting each child’s sense of dignity, encouraging them to internalize and radiate the attributes of a fundamentally spiritual core throughout all aspects of their growth and daily life.

Roger White Academy upheld and promoted a non-denominational outlook, celebrating the diversity of religion, race and culture as an active contribution to the healing of the world that our children live in.

(Roger White Academy, n.d.)

Over the years I gave talks to parents, met with Farzaneh, introduced an OISE doctoral student who assisted in the school and did media interviews promoting the school. The concept of connections was key to the school that included- the creator, self, others, and nature

Farzaneh was dedicated to the school and the children during the sixteen years the school was open. The school touched many lives and several teachers who worked there are now bringing a holistic perspective to the schools where they are working.

The School at Ronald McDonald House. At RMHC Toronto, children with serious illnesses stay with their families while receiving treatment at surrounding hospitals. Katie Doering began teaching on her own at the RMHC Toronto in 2003 which was the beginning of the school there. Katie is one of the most inspiring educators I have ever met. Over the years, she got a beautiful classroom built on the first floor and eventually was able to add two teachers and an early childhood educator to the school. The school is the only one of its kind of the 368 houses around the world. It is the result of Katie's vision to compassionately provide a unique, student-centred, learning environment to facilitate academic, emotional and social success. The school incorporates mindfulness practices, learning circles and regularly pairs students from different grades in cooperative learning activities all in an effort to build a strong and supportive community (RMHC School, n.d.).

The school was featured on the front page of the *Toronto Globe and Mail*. She says her work is about "making a difference in children's day". In the article, "Ms. Doering said there were times when she wondered whether she wanted to continue teaching at the school. In one of her first years, she learned of nine deaths in a one-week period" (Alphonso, 2020, p. 15). The significant impact the school makes on children keeps the staff focused and engaged. A student recently commented at the school's 15th anniversary that "this school, this place and the people here made a massive difference in my life, one whose impact is unmatched by anything else I've experienced thus far." A parent commented, "This is a special school that not only meets requirements academically, but goes over and beyond to provide a safe and fun environment for children, special friendships, and peace of mind for parents...at a time when it is needed most and in an environment where there are children from many different backgrounds and whom are impacted greatly by either their own, or their siblings' special needs" (Alphonso, 2020, p.15).

Katie was in my graduate course *The Holistic Curriculum*; she wrote this about the course, "The school's guiding principle and my daily work has been directly influenced by you and your book. Thank you for all you have done for me and the field of holistic education."

Katie completed her doctorate in 2019. She did research on picture books featuring child protagonists with cancer. Her family held a celebration for completing the doctorate and there was a large group of friends and family attending. At one point we all stood and applauded Katie in honor of what she has done for the children at Ronald McDonald House Charities Toronto. Katie has just completed a book on cancer for children entitled *Evabel* which you can find at Barnes and Noble. Katie and the teachers at the RMH show how holistic education provides for an education that is deeply compassionate.

Equinox Holistic Alternative School. In 2007, a few parents in Toronto met with me and stated their interest in starting a holistic school. For the next two years they worked on a proposal for the Toronto District School Board. The TDSB has a long history of supporting alternative schools (Bascia, Fine, and Levin, 2017).

I was asked to head up a group that would provide advice and support for developing a curriculum. I contacted several people from different backgrounds including Waldorf education, Montessori education, and teachers who had set up their own alternative schools. One of the members was Farzaneh Peterson who established the Roger White Academy in 2002. This group met several times during the two years before the school began in the fall of 2009.

The school was inspired in part of a vision of a holistic school that has been in all the editions of *The Holistic Curriculum*:

At this school we care about kids. We care about their academic work and we want them to see the unity of knowledge. In other words, we want to let students see how subjects relate to one another and to the students themselves. In relating subjects we find that the arts, or more generally the artistic sense, can facilitate these connections. We care about how kids think and, in particular, we try to encourage creative thinking. We want the students to be able to solve problems and use both analytical and intuitive thinking in the process.

We care about the physical development of the student and we devote part of the curriculum to activities that foster healthy bodies and positive self-image. We hope to connect the student's body and mind so that they feel "at home" with themselves.

We care about how students relate to others and to the community at large. We focus on communication skills and as the students develop, we encourage them to use these skills in a variety of community settings. At the

same time we encourage the community to come into the school, particularly artists who can inspire the students' aesthetic sense.

Most of all, we care about the students' being. We realize that the final contribution that they make to this planet will be from the deepest part of their being and not just from the skills we teach them. We can try to foster the spiritual growth of the student by working on ourselves as teachers to become more conscious and caring. By working on ourselves, we hope to foster in our students a deep sense of connectedness within themselves and to other beings on this planet. (2019, p. 216-7)

After the first year they changed the name of the school since the older students were not comfortable attending a school with "child" in the title. The school-based part of its program on *The Holistic Curriculum* and the six connections which they define as Community, Earth, Inner, Body/Mind, Subject, and Intuition/Inquiry (Equinox Holistic Alternative School, n.d.). Two teachers, Deborah Adelman and Marcia McVean were part of the founding group of teachers who stayed with the school until 2021. They are outstanding teachers who provided support and guidance to other teachers in the school. I have been connected to the school in different ways: attending staff meetings, helping with parent meetings, working with teachers on the staff handbook, and meeting the Toronto trustees to advocate for the school.

I conducted a study of the school in 2015 where I interviewed teachers, students, and parents (Miller, 2016). The mission of the school as stated in the staff handbook is "To engage hearts, bodies, minds and spirits of students in a learning environment that instills a love, respect and understanding of what is around them, igniting their natural curiosity through mentorship, so they may choose to honour and value the world around them" (p. 2). In my study of the school, teachers, parents and students clearly support this mission. Both teachers and parents believe the vision is about reaching the "head, hands and heart" of the students. One parent said this about the vision, "It means encouraging kids to think in all different directions. Integrated subject matter. Also thinking about themselves and their communities. Self- knowledge, coming into your own as a person" (p. 88). She added that "it worked well for her daughter" (p. 288). One student who attended Equinox and was in high school said that school "focuses on the whole

child. Not just teaching academics." She added "Really teaches the entire body" (p. 289).

I interviewed four students who attended Equinox and now were in high school and I was impressed by how thoughtful and articulate they were. I also asked whether the school was meeting the expectation of teaching the whole child. Everyone I interviewed felt that it was. One parent whose daughter was in high school said "it surpassed my expectations because I see how well adjusted she is" (p. 289). Her daughter was on the honor roll in high school. Another mother whose son was bullied in another school he attended said, "Equinox met my expectations. It was amazing, wonderful. I had peace of mind sending him there" (p. 289). Another commented on how she witnessed compassion and empathy in the children at Equinox. A parent agreed with this and said that her boys "care more about others and they care more about the planet". Several parents commented on the quality of the teachers there. Finally, one parent said:

It was an **incubator** where they could mature at their own rate. So much emphasis on conflict resolution, experiencing the difference of others, and accepting others. Kids could grow up without experiencing the pressures in other schools that I hear about. Gaining the core sense of self is so important as you are gaining independence and going out into the world. Going into high school and not needing to be 'cool'. All of her friends from Equinox are really different from each other but they all connect with each other and accept each other as being different. It is lovely. (p. 298)

Students in high school whom I interviewed agreed with this statement. One girl said that it helped her develop self-confidence while one boy said that at Equinox he learned it was "OK to be different" (p. 298). He added that he could build "his own platform as an individual. Equinox helps you do that" (298).

Like all schools, Equinox has struggled with the challenges of COVID-19; yet there is still a waitlist for parents who want to enroll their children in the school. In May 2022, I was asked to do a workshop with staff as there are several new teachers. I was impressed by the energy and commitment of this group and am confident that they continue to offer holistic education and provide an environment for the development of the whole child.

Selm Academy. Just before COVID-19 struck, a Muslim student, Mohammadreza Ardehali, enrolled in two of my

class including *The Holistic Curriculum*. The course helped him develop an Islamic holistic school for young Muslim children, the Selm Academy. Selm means peace in Arabic. Here is the vision of the school from the website

Our vision is to be a leader in educating children and youth who serve humanity so that they seek to provide solutions to the problems that challenge the human society while they are conscious of the spiritual dimension of their existence. (Selm Academy, n.d.)

Under the section “What makes us different?” there are the following items.

Outstanding curricular and co-curricular programs

- Holistic Education
- Relevant, Experiential, and Relational Education
- Integrated Curriculum
- Mentoring

There is also an extensive section on the website describing holistic education which is headed by the Wellness Principles of the school that include seven different areas-environmental, aesthetical, social, spiritual, physical, intellectual and emotional. Several of these areas focus on connections. For example, the physical includes “Body Mind Connections”, the intellectual “Subject Connections”, the social “Community Connections: and the environmental “The Earth Connections” (Selm Academy, n.d.).

Below is information also included in the material on holistic education.

Holistic Education

- Mindfulness
- Loving kindness
- Environmental respect and stewardship
- Compassion
- Collaborative learning
- Community building
- Social activism
- Problem solving
- Multiple ways of knowing

Mohammadreza is a passionate educator who works from a place of love and compassion. When I contacted him about his school, he wrote this to me in an email

Hi Jack,

I missed you and our class a lot.

Of course, I heard about your memoir and I am still in touch with some of my classmates from your class such as Daniel Abramson (From Jewish school) to have a holistic cooperation!

I am working hard to implement what I learned from you.

Our school’s name is SELM ACADEMY. SELM in Semetic languages (Arabic) means PEACE. Hopefully, we can educate our students to bring peace to this chaotic world.

Jack! Can you believe what happened in Ukraine? Their mindset has not changed after WWII. This world needs to have a more holistic understanding of human interconnectedness.

It is my pleasure to be mentioned by my teacher, who is my role model in believing in holistic education.

Sincerely,

Mohammadreza Ardehali

I was so impressed that Mohammedreza is collaborating with one of my students who is working in a nearby Jewish school.

Possibility of a fifth school. These schools show how holistic education can thrive and flourish in different contexts. There is another school that is in the planning stages that has also been influenced by *The Holistic Curriculum*. In June, 2021 I received this email.

Shekoh/Hello

As noted in the subject line, I am a member of the Mohawk Nation at Six Nations (Reserve) and am just starting some research into a paper on Holistic Education for Lifelong Learning who are interested in making changes in our elementary education system here.

My daughter and I are working together. She is a PhD candidate at Trent in the Native Studies department. I was an EdD candidate at OISE many years ago - finished all the coursework but did not write the comps or finish a dissertation!

I am wondering if my daughter, Karenniyo (Caroline) and I could meet with you in the fall when we can, hopefully, meet face to face again. We can come up to OISE any

time in early or late September as I will be out of town from September 14 to 24.

Two of the books we are reading to establish the 'big ideas' for our paper are your books, *Holistic Curriculum* and *International Handbook of Holistic Education*.

Niawehkawah/Thank you very much.

Claudine VanEvery-Albert, Yakowennatoken

Six Nations of the Grand River

I was honored to be invited by Claudine and her daughter to the Six Nations Reserve in November to discuss further how I might assist them in their work. I look forward to working with them as their plans unfold.

These schools show how *The Holistic Curriculum* and holistic education in general can work and flourish in a variety of different circumstances. I believe that these schools can inspire others in developing their own programs that fit their unique contexts.

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Acknowledgement

John (Jack) Miller has been working in the field of holistic education for over 40 years. He is author/editor of more than 20 books on holistic learning and contemplative practices in education which include *The Contemplative Practitioner: Meditation in Education and the Workplace*, *Love and Compassion: Exploring Their Role in Education* and his memoir, *A Holistic Educator's Journey*. His writing has been translated into eight languages. *The Holistic Curriculum* has inspired the programs in four different schools including the Equinox Holistic Alternative School in Toronto. Jack teaches courses on holistic education and contemplative education for graduate students at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto where he is Professor.

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