

# ***Aesthetics as a Curriculum of Holism and Healing***

**Jon L. Smythe**

E-mail: [jon.smythe@okstate.edu](mailto:jon.smythe@okstate.edu)

Received May 2023

Accepted for publication September 2023

Published May 2024

## **Abstract**

For centuries, aesthetic experiences have played a significant role in health and wellbeing. Aesthetic experiences typically involve creating and participating in the arts (song, dance, music, media, etc.) and through communing with nature. They are multisensory, imaginative, and contemplative. Aesthetic experiences work to restore emotional and physical balance in the lives of individuals and communities. They are also holistic in their ability to heal the fragmentation of body, mind, and spirit. Despite ample historical, cultural, and scientific evidence, modern industrial cultures have disavowed this link between aesthetics, holism, and healing. This is reflected in current curriculum practices that focus solely on developing the mind, to the exclusion of body and soul. This paper reaffirms the relationship between aesthetics and holistic healing and considers what this may mean for curriculum. Examples are drawn from Greek mythology, Indigenous wisdom, nature, neuroaesthetics, and the concept of pilgrimage, among others. Connections are also made to the author's experiences in using aesthetic curriculum in his middle school and graduate school classes as a way to promote holistic learning and healing.

**Keywords:** aesthetics, holism, healing, curriculum

---

*"As this year draws to a close, one might find it in poor taste to be preoccupied by beauty and art. Then again, perhaps ugly times are precisely when we need the salve of aesthetics most."* (Chatterjee, 2020, p. 3)

-Anjan Chatterjee, professor of neurobiology at the University of Pennsylvania and Director of the Penn Center for Neuroaesthetics (PCFN)

*"May the stars carry your sadness away,  
May the flowers fill your heart with beauty,  
May hope forever wipe away your tears,  
And, above all, may silence make you strong."*  
(George, n.d.)

-Chief Dan George, born Geswanouth Slahoot, Chief of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation from 1951 to 1963

A student walked into my middle school English Language Arts classroom traumatized by his parents' impending acrimonious divorce. No amount of essay writing, classroom discussion, book reading, and test taking was going to help the student "learn" more. While the student couldn't emotionally engage in planned class activities, one thing he could do was express his pain through art. With paper and pencil in hand, the student spontaneously lay down on the carpeted floor in the back of the room and drew an enormous, elaborate dragon. As he silently drew his dragon, he listened to the sound of classroom conversation floating around the room. None of the other students complained that he got to do something different than they did. Some days later, he gave me a signed copy of the dragon which I pinned onto the bulletin board behind my desk. He seemed happy every time I commented on the aesthetic aspects of the drawing – the detail in each of the dragon's scales, the curve of its body, the ribbon-like movement in the tail, the toothy grin. Soon thereafter, he drew other dragons to hang on my bulletin board and he engaged with the class more fully once again.

I think this student's story speaks to the importance of artmaking in the healing process. Drawing seemed to be a primal response to his pain since he did not need my coaxing to do so. My role was to make space in the curriculum for his grieving so that he might become whole once again. I was happy to oblige. Who and what would I be if I did not accept my most sacred responsibility to protect all life?

Since antiquity, the arts and aesthetic experiences have played an essential role in healing practices concerned with the health and wellbeing of the whole person. For example, the therapeutic use of music was documented in China's first medical text, *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine*,

written more than 2,000 years ago (Gong, 2014). From these early roots, a primary role of music was to holistically "heal the heart, enrich the mind, and harmonize a person's soul" (Micunovic, 2021). Additionally, the written character for "medicine" is a combination of the characters for "music," and "plants" which also points to a connection to nature (Ho, 2017). This relationship between aesthetics and healing is also expressed through the Chinese adage "music before medicine." I share these examples to note that the holistic, aesthetic, and healing practices in Chinese and other cultures (as shown later) have a long history.

More recently, Fancourt and Finn's (2019) World Health Organization report also found a connection between the arts and healing. In a synthesis of more than 3,000 articles regarding the health benefits of creating art, the results yielded two overarching themes and four sub-themes, "prevention and promotion" and "management and treatment" (p. 7). The articles reviewed indicate that creating and engaging with the arts can *prevent, treat, and manage* a number of health issues, including mental illness, trauma, stress, anxiety, loneliness, isolation, developmental disorders, and physical diseases (pp. 7–29). The arts also *promote* health by fostering social and cultural cohesion, developing prosocial abilities (empathy, trust, conflict resolution, etc.), and using the arts to address social issues. Taken together, this research indicates that participating in the arts is a proactive approach to health and well-being *before, during, and after* certain social, emotional, and physical issues arise.

Relatedly, the branch of psychology known as expressive arts therapy utilizes multiple modes of arts as a means for patients to articulate and explore their "inner and outer worlds", to facilitate

emotional growth, and to heal from trauma (*Psychology Today*, 2022). Expressive arts therapy draws impetus from the Greek notion of “poiesis.” Poiesis refers to making art and other activities that “bring something new in the world” and is fundamental to being human (Levine, Knill, & Levine, 2004, p. 16). For Fuchs-Knill and Knill (2015) who are professionals in the field of expressive arts, it is this newness that is essential to the learning process. They write,

To learn actually requires an encounter with something unknown to us. Working with the arts is in that sense a gift to any classroom, since the material to learn from is always new, as if it were just being created in that moment. (p. 35)

While teachers should not be expected to function as art therapists, understanding the underlying principles behind expressive art therapy can provide a backdrop against which learning and healing may occur.

One way that teachers may promote healing in their classrooms is through the use of holistic teaching practices. According to John Miller (2005), a pioneer in the field, holistic education seeks to heal the fragmentation wrought by formal, standardized curriculum by nurturing “the development of the whole person” including the “intellectual, emotional, physical, social, aesthetic, and spiritual” (p. 2). Miller (2022) goes on to explain that teaching holistically kindles “wisdom, compassion, wholeness/wellbeing, a sense of awe and wonder, and a sense of purpose” (p.1). While this paper takes into account each of these elements, I highlight the thread of aesthetics and

its healing potential when infused into curriculum<sup>1</sup>.

The field of aesthetics is traditionally concerned with the “the realm of the beautiful, the ugly, the sublime, and the elegant...and of contemplation, sensuous enjoyment, and charm” (Scruton, 2022). The foundational curriculum scholar, Maxine Greene (2001) points to the holistic nature of aesthetic education as involving “cognitive, perceptual, emotional, and imaginative development” and seeking “greater coherence in the world” (p. 7). In this vein, she entreats teachers to engage with various art forms and to “attend not only cognitively and according to rule, but with their emotions, their nervous system, their body-minds,” which in turn “nurtures a special kind of reflectiveness and expressiveness” (pp. 6–7).

Sayers (2004) goes on to make the connection between aesthetics, the arts, and healing. She writes that “Art and psychoanalysis are arguably successors to...rites, rituals and sacraments in giving healing shape and form to the otherwise disquieting shapeless and formless, ineffable transcendence of the psyche or spirit” (p. 777). I fully agree with Sayers’ perspective, yet I would note that participating in the arts and aesthetics heralds a transcendence of *both* psyche *and* spirit and has implications for the body as well.

Despite the vast historical, social, cultural, empirical, and psychological evidence linking aesthetics and holistic healing, modern industrial societies have disregarded this link. This is

---

<sup>1</sup> Since the reconceptualization of Curriculum Studies began in the 1970s, “curriculum” is understood, not as a tangible prescriptive plan of study, rather as an interdisciplinary “process of development, dialogue, inquiry, transformation” (Doll, 1993, p. 13). Consistent with this understanding, I use the term “curriculum” throughout this paper in lieu of the traditional, technical use of the term “curricula.”

reflected in standardized curriculum that rejects the connections between mind, body, nature, spirit, self, community, and cosmos. It is my belief that making spaces for arts and aesthetics in the curriculum, under the broader umbrella of holistic education, can give new life to disembodied educational practices and holds the promise of healing the brokenness that such practices inspire.

### Guiding Principles & Classroom Examples

Given that educational contexts, students, and teachers vary drastically, there is no one way to “do” holistic education. Still, there are some common aims that can guide a holistic approach. For instance, Johnson (2023) elucidates 6 main characteristics of holistic education: nurturing the whole person (intellectual, emotional, physical, social, imaginative, and transpersonal dimensions), promoting cooperative and egalitarian relationships with others, incorporating students’ actual lived experiences in the curriculum, helping students critically examine and develop their own beliefs and values, recognizing the “transpersonal element” (a “oneness” with the universe which one might refer to as spirituality), and the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things (pp. 4–5). I draw on these characteristics to guide my thinking throughout this paper.

In terms of interconnectedness, Spring (2023) adds that holistic education helps students make “intrapersonal connections” by which they come to know themselves more deeply, “interpersonal connections” in which they build harmonious relationships with others, and “transpersonal connections” by which students see themselves as part of a larger integrated whole and further that their actions have far-reaching implications (pp.

5–6). He also suggests that holistic education inspires “intelligent acts as those that would nurture or give to self, others, and one’s environment” and eschews “unintelligent acts” that “break down such interconnectedness by harming or taking from self, others, or one’s environment. To this last point, any curriculum that splinters students’ lives and relationships foments unintelligent acts of authoritarian regulation.

Keeping with the theme of this paper, Bai et al. (2018) suggest that healing should be at the center of teaching (p. 110). Using a holistic-contemplative framework, they advocate that teachers need to be “wise leaders,” “compassionate healers,” and “empathetically attuned” to students’ woundedness. As such, Bai et al. believe the teacher’s role lies in helping students “(re)gain wholeness” (p. 110). I believe that engaging students in the arts and aesthetics does help students in working toward wholeness.

In terms of aesthetics and healing, Hart (2018) suggests that experiencing “beauty” has therapeutic and transformative properties. He also offers a variety of question prompts that can help students explore the concept of beauty on a more complex level. One question listed under the category “transformation and paradox” asks, “By what means does something ugly become something beautiful?” (p. 30). The question is, in part, at the crux of this paper in that each of the student examples I present demonstrate that engaging students in the arts and aesthetics is one means through which students transform ugliness into something beautiful in ways that are ultimately healing.

I was lucky enough to teach at an independent school founded on Reggio Emilia principles during part of my teaching career. The Reggio curriculum

views learning as holistic, organic, imaginative, and community oriented. According to Loris Malaguzzi who developed the Reggio approach in Italy after WWII, the child is “made of one hundred” in that they have one hundred hands, thoughts, ways of speaking, listening, marveling, singing, etc., yet schools and society “steal ninety-nine” of them (Malaguzzi, 2022). This theft occurs by separating work from play, science from imagination, sky from earth, dream from reason, and so on.

Although this approach was developed for infant-toddler and preschool levels, at our school, these concepts were woven throughout all grades in varying degrees. Students were always surrounded by art supplies, books of every sort, technology, plants and animals, and spaces designed for communal work. When we received new students that had been disenfranchised and hurt by other schools, I saw how emotionally “healing” our school was for them as they gained confidence in their own imagination and through a community atmosphere in which student well-being was a priority. It is through these and other experiences, I started to understand more deeply that holistic and aesthetic education holds the promise of healing. And, thus, began my journey.

When I use the term “healing”, I refer to an ongoing process rather than a sense of being completely “healed.” Borrowing from Indigenous and other wisdom traditions, healing also refers to establishing and restoring emotional, mental, and spiritual balance in the self and in the community. It is not necessarily tied to physical injury and disease (de Leeuw, 2017). While recognizing that both traditional and modern practices each have their place in healing, Rabbitskin contends that the “idea that our illnesses can be solved with prescriptions, or a diagnosis comes from a single

worldview. A pill doesn’t have spirit” (in de Leeuw, 2017, p. 58). This view echoes Levine, Knill, and Levine’s (2004) suggestion that traditional ceremonial healing practices have been supplanted with Eurocentric “materialistic medicine” and “disembodied spirituality” (p. 60).

In addition, aesthetic experiences are those which, “touch the depth of soul, evoke imagination, and engage emotions and serene thought” (Levine, Knill, & Levine, 2004, pp. 136–137). They are often, though not always, nurtured through creating, viewing, and participating in various artistic modalities including visual and performing arts, dance and movement, music and sound, architecture, landscape, and more. An example of an aesthetic experience is that of performing yoga. The arrangement of the space, the smell of incense, the background music, the movement of bodies in sync, the sound of the yoga instructor’s voice, and so on, form a meditative ambience that invites introspection, a feeling of community, a sense of mind-body wholeness, and a oneness with the universe.

Communing with nature also offers an aesthetic experience. For example, the sight of a misty fog that envelops the land like a sleepy cloud, the silence broken by wind rushing through leaves and tall grasses, the warm hug of a natural hot spring, the taste of fresh fruit newly gathered from tree and vine, and the smell of manure which eventually turns into fragrant flowers, all make us think and feel something. It is these thoughts and feelings that remind us of what it means to be human.

What follows is an exploration of the ways in which aesthetics and healing are interwoven in a variety of social and cultural contexts. These include examples drawn from Greek mythology and philosophy, Indigenous wisdom, nature, the

field of neuroaesthetics, and the concept of pilgrimage. I also make connections between those examples and stories of students from the classes I have taught. My hope is to show that aesthetic wanderings foster holistic healing and act as a wellspring from which curriculum may be nourished.

### **Greek Mythology & Philosophy**

In ancient Greece, the god Apollo represented, among other things, the “positive aspects of the human condition such as music, poetry, purification, healing, and medicine” (Cartwright, 2019). As if to emphasize these aspects, Apollo passed on the gifts of music, poetry, and art to his son Orpheus, and to his son Asclepius, he gave the gifts of medicine and healing. In essence, the holism of the father is split between the two sons, perhaps symbolizing a Western cultural preference for bifurcation.

Apollo’s relationship with his brother, Dionysus, also speaks to this split. Apollo symbolized the “masculine” traits of harmony, light, order, and reason, while his brother, Dionysus, the god of wine, symbolized “feminine” traits embodied through pleasure, nature, chaos, and ecstasy (Harris, n.d.). Whereas the opposition of the brothers was “destructive,” the union of the two was a “source of creativity and procreation, necessary for health and wellbeing” (Harris, n.d.). Given the logical and linear focus in education today which privileges constructs of masculinity (order, reason) over the feminine (chaos, ecstasy), restoring balance within curriculum calls for reclaiming Dionysus.

The Greek philosopher, Aristotle, also suggested that the arts were a source of “catharsis.” For example, engaging with the arts such as a tragic play could provoke the release of inner fears,

anxieties, and emotions. In modern times, watching a sad movie might move us to tears, yet may ultimately make us feel better and help us recognize that we are not alone. When I think of catharsis in this sense, I think of a student who wrote a eunoia poem as part of a class project. In a eunoia poem, all words must contain the same vowel and only that vowel (e.g., using the vowel “I”, one could write, “In spirit, I find insight”). On the day students were asked to share their poems, she asked if it was okay that she not share it with the class. Given the painful nature of the poem, I understood why. Sometime later, the student emailed to let me know that she had entered the poem in a creative writing contest and that she had won first prize. A part of her poem (shared with her permission), reads:

Her eye weeps whenever she remembers.  
The endless hell, she feels she never left.  
Where’s the new she? Her new steel  
center. The new shelter. The new bed. She  
needs rest. Let her sleep. Let her get well.  
She knew when she left, he’d never let her  
be free. (Walter, 2021)

Certainly, her poem is compelling. Equally compelling is the way in which she worked through her fear so that she was able to publicly voice and release some of her innermost pain.

This student’s story expresses that aesthetic and arts-related assignments provide opportunities for students to transform hurtful experiences into works of beauty. In this case, there was no expectation for students to express their pain and not all students used the assignment to do so. This example also shows that “artwork” is “academic work” that holistically taps into students’ multiple abilities, including reflecting, critical thinking, decision making, creating, utilizing linguistic structures, engaging emotions, and so on.

## Indigenous Wisdom

Indigenous tribes are credited as recognizing and maintaining holistic relationships between nature, self, community, and cosmos. In both past and present, Indigenous peoples have cultivated personal and community health through aesthetic practices. The non-profit group, IndigenousWays (n.d.), describes Indigenous healing practices as oriented to the reintegration of the fragmented “individual, family, and community” which involves “dropping walls of separation so that all can be heard, seen and received” (Special Projects). They add that “one of the most powerful outlets for spreading messages, ideas and healing in our world is through arts and music” (Special Projects).

It would be too great a task to explore the aesthetic healing practice of each Indigenous group. One belief system that stands out as especially relevant to the subject of this paper is the Diné (Navajo) concept, “Hózhó”, which translates to the “Beauty Way of life”. Peate (in Toth, 2017) describes Hózhó as,

A complex Navajo philosophical, religious, and aesthetic [concept] roughly translated to “beauty.” Hozho also means seeking and incorporating aesthetic qualities into life, it means inner life and harmony, and it means making the most of all that surrounds us. It refers to a positive, beautiful, harmonious, happy environment that must be constantly created by thought and deed. Hozho encourages us to go in beauty and to enjoy the gifts of life and nature and health. (Navajo concept of Hohzo)

Additionally, the Hózhó concept is expressed through the closing prayer of the Navajo Blessingway ceremony, which reads in part,

In beauty I walk  
With beauty before me I walk  
With beauty behind me I walk |  
With beauty above me I walk  
With beauty around me I walk  
It has become beauty again...  
Today I will walk out, today everything  
negative will leave me  
I will be as I was before...nothing will  
hinder me.

(Blessingway in Amerindian, 2023)

Purposefully cultivating an aesthetic life of beauty and harmony is both transcendent and sublime. It suggests not only appreciating the beauty around us, but also continually striving to create happy and harmonious relationships through our thoughts and actions. Further, living in beauty is a means for maintaining health and wellbeing. The ending lines of the Blessingway prayer also imply that walking in beauty involves letting go of negativity and overcoming the obstacles that may hinder us.

In a middle school class, we listened to a podcast about Mohammad Sayed who lost his legs during a bombing in Afghanistan when he was 5 or 6 years old which meant that he would have to use a wheelchair for the rest of his life (Bannister, 2017). Sayed shared his story of survival with candor and humor. He also explained that through his interest in comic books, he realized that there were no heroes that were in a wheelchair, thus he created a comic book superhero named “Wheelchair Man.” Using the podcast as a jumping point for students to think about the obstacles they faced in their own lives and ways to overcome those obstacles, they set about creating their own

superheroes and designing their own comic books. Two students asked if they could work on the project together. On presentation day, these two students acted out their comic book characters, complete with red capes. At some point, they opened their capes to reveal words and phrases they had attached to their capes. These words expressed every painful, hateful, and ugly word that had been hurled at them and/or their family members. The class and I sat in awe as they beamed proudly at both their own creativity and the fact that they had surprised us. It seemed that all the hate that had weighed them down was now giving them flight.

I used Sayed's story in my class in the hopes that students could make connections between Sayed's life and their own. I wanted students to learn *from* Sayed (not simply *about* him), especially the way he used art as an outlet for his pain and healing. I also wanted students to explore the ways in which the wars in Afghanistan (Sayed's home country) were often proxy wars provoked by other countries as a part of a worldwide ecosystem and that they did not exist in a vacuum. This is to say that one needs to see the bigger picture and the interrelatedness between people and contexts before making any judgments.

## Nature

As noted previously, being in nature is an aesthetic experience as it makes use of our senses, makes us aware of the beauty that surrounds us, taps into our spiritual connection with the universe, and promotes wellbeing. Indigenous groups have taken this ecocentric stance since the beginning of time. Research also supports this perspective (see Weir, 2020 for a list of studies in this area). For anthropocentric cultures, greater emphasis is placed on humans and human activities such as the industrial revolution and the tech boom. From

this perspective, caring for nature is a minimal or non-existent priority. Given the environmental crises that we now find ourselves in, a curriculum that recenters nature as the source of all life, is both timely and urgent.

Recognizing that we are living in anthropocentric times, an international movement, known as "geopoetics", is working to bring greater attention to nature and to geopolitical concerns by,

creatively expressing the Earth in a variety of ways e.g., oral expression, writing, the visual arts, music, geology, geography, other sciences, philosophy, combinations of art forms and of the arts, sciences and thinking. (Scottish Centre for Geopoetics, n.d.)

Ironically, in working to draw attention to and "heal" nature, we make a path for healing ourselves.

At our school, we formed a "Nature Club" to explore some of the geopolitical concerns that affect us locally. Students also took care of the animals at the school, including chickens from which they could gather eggs and a pair of alpacas whose wool could be harvested for fiber arts. In addition, the school had easy access to a large, wooded area that was its own classroom. We took students on nature walks numerous times for both scientific and aesthetic exploration. Students in my English classes quietly wrote their essays and poems under large shady trees. Students also made art from some of the trash they found near the school or around their neighborhoods to call attention to the problem of pollution.

Further, we created a garden in a small patch of grass outside one of the classrooms which sustained Monarch caterpillars and butterflies. At the appropriate time, the Monarch caterpillars

were placed in protective containers. Once they emerged from their cocoons, they were tagged and released in time for their annual migration south. Each step offered opportunities for learning and developing wonder in nature's ability to create life and beauty.

Increasingly, getting out into nature and attending to its aesthetic aspects – its colors, sights, smells, sounds, textures, and nuances – is recognized as indispensable for maintaining one's health and well-being. Here, we wanted students to develop a reciprocal relationship with the natural world and to see themselves as part of its beauty. It also gave them insights into ways in which human actions play a role in preserving and/or damaging this delicate relationship.

### Neuroaesthetics

While the link between aesthetics and healing is not new, what is new is that the scientific community is beginning to offer support for the connection between the two. For example, research in the "transdisciplinary" and "extradisciplinary" field of "neuroaesthetics" and/or "neuroarts" has shown that aesthetic experiences stimulate neurobiological responses that, improve our physical and mental health; amplify our ability to prevent, manage, or recover from disease challenges; enhance brain development in children; build more equitable communities; and foster wellbeing through multiple biological systems. (Aspen Institute, 2021, p. 2)

Examples of this work include looking at how the aesthetic design of a building affects mood, how drawing promotes children's social and emotional wellbeing, and how community arts practices decrease feelings of isolation (p. 2).

Further, according to the *Neuroarts Blueprint* (Aspen Institute, 2021), an important function of the neuroarts ecosystem is to build more equitable communities, as noted in the preceding quote. Pointing out the "health inequities in the United States and around the world," the field is working to "ensure that the tools and power of the arts are readily, consistently, and equitably accessible to all populations and in every community across cultures, racial and ethnic background, socioeconomic status, skill set, and more" (p. 39). Curriculum can aid in this effort by ensuring that students are able to draw upon the "tools and power of the arts" in service of their own well-being. Giving students the time, space, and resources to aesthetically express themselves has broader social and emotional implications. Imbuing curriculum with aesthetics allows students a psychological release and the arts can help bring attention to the social inequities that affect marginalized communities.

In a master's level course, teachers were asked to engage with and create various works of art while reflecting on ways in which they could stimulate imagination and to awaken the curriculum. I had not taught the course with the healing aspects of aesthetic engagement in mind until a student mentioned that she found a way to use origami in her role as an interim administrator at her school. She noted that when her middle school students were referred to her office for "behavioral problems," they were often in a highly agitated state. Before having any discussion, she asked them to create a piece of origami art. She said that doing this helped students focus and calm down so that they could begin their discussion of what was troubling them. Recently, she sent me a photo of a bulletin board covered in origami hearts.

I wanted to share this student's example because it supports the idea that humans are

neurologically “hard-wired” for the arts and, owing to this hard wiring, the arts are calming when stress responses are activated. It also shows that school administrators can also take an aesthetic approach for promoting student well-being. Given the Western cultural preference for “scientific knowledge,” one might use the resources cited here to make the case with parents, school administrators, and political actors of the need for greater inclusion of the arts within curriculum. In view of our current political climate, this scientific evidence may not hold much weight, but many of us teachers can feel confident and justified in the choice to give equal space for the arts in our classrooms.

### **Pilgrimage**

Another example of an aesthetic experience that stimulates learning, contemplation, and healing, is that of the pilgrimage described as a “journey...*especially*: one to a shrine or a sacred place” and as “the course of life itself” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Bailey and Kingston (2020) poetically and visually describe their pilgrimages to the Oklahoma City National Memorial, built on the site of a bombing in 1995 that killed 168 people and wounded countless others. They write about the design of the space, the objects left in tribute by fellow travelers and themselves, and the multisensory aspects of their pilgrimage that led to a sense of spirituality, wholeness, and healing. In addition, Bailey & Kingston (2020) write that the learnings that arise from the pilgrimage include, a “stretching toward” defined as a “continuous process of careful attending,” as well as “wandering, surrendering, realizing mortality and vulnerability, peace consciousness and feeling interconnected” (p. 285).

This recalls an interdisciplinary 8<sup>th</sup> grade unit, in which our class studied a horrific example of racial violence that occurred in our city. As part of the unit, we drove students to a memorial park in remembrance of this event. We asked students to silently move around the park and to write down their impressions, thoughts, questions, and emotions, as they experienced the park. They also made drawings and took photos of the things that stood out and spoke to them. This added an aesthetic, moral, and spiritual layer to the lessons offered in class and in this way, learning was broadened. In lieu of going on a pilgrimage which may not be possible for all students, perhaps students could design their own shrines and monuments with “careful attending” and healing in mind.

In my view, the pilgrimage entreated students to enter an aesthetic space which evoked remembrance, introspection, and reverence. It invited them to walk in solitude, contemplate what it means to be human, and connect with something that is innately spiritual. I also think that the pilgrimage can allow for releasing “mementos” of our sorrow and for calming the tensions we must endure.

### **Implications**

What messages do we send students when schools focus on the mind divorced from body and spirit? Do we imply that the things that make us human – imagination, intuition, artistry, emotions, spirituality, bodily senses – must be suppressed to be successful both in school and in life? That test scores equal intelligence and are worthy of reward? That silence is a meaningless act of compliance?

When students are asked to deny parts of themselves, curriculum becomes dehumanizing.

When school subjects are broken into separate piles, curriculum becomes distorted. When schools neglect students' mental, physical, and spiritual well-being, curriculum becomes destructive. When schools fail to nurture reverence for nature and all living things, curriculum becomes poisonous. The obverse is also true. Through a focus on interconnectedness, caring, and the reunification of body, spirit, and mind, curriculum becomes restorative.

Sadly, we have ceded much of our thought processes to technology and artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping schools and society. For instance, some teachers have told me that they have used AI (specifically ChatGPT) to create assignments for their students and some students tell me they have used it to complete assignments. It is frightening to think that schools have become training grounds for living artificial lives in artificial worlds. This is not to suggest that technology is inherently bad but that something is fundamentally lost when algorithms replace the heartbeat of Mother Earth. This is concerning because it is easy to see the violence that follows those who feel spiritually, emotionally, and physically disconnected and have no outlet for coping with profoundly negative emotions.

Teachers are also dehumanized and demoralized when required to participate in educational systems that are distorted, destructive, and poisonous. Sometimes they work under threat of dismissal and/or monetary fines for failing to teach a legislated curriculum. While teachers cannot and must not be expected to carry the burden or put their careers in jeopardy, they do play a pivotal role in helping students make connections across subject areas and in aiding them in seeing the interrelationships between humans (self/other), animals, the environment

(river, sun, stone, tree, etc.), and the universe as a whole.

Under these auspices, curriculum must be a rehumanizing concern for us all. In an era when much of the curriculum is primarily oriented toward compartmentalized and technological knowledge, the need for holistic education is pressing. Despite this pressing need, teaching holistically poses major problems within socio-political confines that equate spirituality with religion, view the inner life as superfluous, work to defund the arts, and ignore the need for healing. Yet within these confines, the seeds of creativity are sown.

As I hope to have shown in the classroom vignettes, teaching holistically and aesthetically is a fluid and gentle approach that calls for being attuned both to students' lives and to the singing of the cosmos. It also does not necessarily require teaching in the traditional sense. Borrowing from a passage in Muriel Spark's (1961) novel, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, teaching isn't about putting something unnatural into students' minds, it is a "leading out of what is already there in the pupil's soul" (Chapter 2). It is this "leading out" that is the purview of holistic, contemplative, and aesthetic education.

### **In Reflection**

Returning to the vignettes offered in this paper, I did not set out to engage students in the process of healing when I designed my aesthetics-oriented curriculum. My goal was to stimulate imagination, to show that learning could be fun, meaningful, and captivating. I also wanted to poke holes in the bubble of everyday life so that students could make new connections beyond the insular walls of the school. I hadn't been prepared for the ways in which students were processing their hurts

through the aesthetic openings I had created in my curriculum. It was surprising to me how students transformed ugliness into beautiful works of art so that their pain became a source of healing. While teachers and curriculum designers may create opportunities for aesthetic experiences to occur, it is impossible to know in advance what meanings that students will ascribe to those experiences. Nor is it possible to know if students find such experiences healing – at least not visibly nor immediately. It often takes time for meanings and self-awareness to emerge. This may be frustrating for those who seek immediate, tangible evidence that learning has “occurred.”

Inviting aesthetics into curriculum is a source of spirituality, care, and holistic healing, for individuals, families, and communities. Incorporating aesthetics in curriculum does not discard logical and linear knowledge at the outset. The technical, rational at play with the natural, the intuitive, and the spiritual, dynamically restores curriculum giving it energy and life. Without each other in some combination, curriculum becomes out of balance. Paradoxically perhaps we can also appreciate this lack of balance even though it can produce pain and frustration. It can, after all, give us a clearer vision of what we value most, provide a direction for our educational efforts, and make healing possible.

### A Circling Back

A university faculty member leaves his first therapy session. After this first visit, he spontaneously picks up his iPad and begins to sketch out a dragon. What shade of green should the dragon be? How would it look if the eyes had a yellow background? What if the dragon was spewing a huge red flame?

He shows the dragon to his therapist on the next visit. She comments on his talent and the creativity of the piece. Most notably that the dragon’s flame looks like a large, beautiful flower. Excitedly he shares the dragon with his friends who also remark on the various creative aspects of the drawing. In some ways, a weight has been shared and lifted and a part of me is healed.

### References

- Amerindian (2023). *Navajo blessing prayer*. <https://esl-voices.com/navajo-blessing-prayer-walk-in-beauty/>
- Aspen Institute (2021). *Neuroarts blueprint: Advancing the science of art, healing, and well-being*. [https://neuroartsblueprint.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/NeuroArtsBlue\\_ExecSummary\\_FinalOnline\\_spreads\\_v32.pdf](https://neuroartsblueprint.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/NeuroArtsBlue_ExecSummary_FinalOnline_spreads_v32.pdf)
- Bai, H., Morgan, P., Scott, C., & Cohen, A. (2018). Holistic-contemplative pedagogy for twenty-first century teacher education: Education as healing. In J.P. Miller, K. Nigh, M.J. Binder, B. Novak, & S. Crowell (Eds.), *International handbook of holistic education* (pp. 108–117). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315112398>
- Bailey, L.E. & Kingston, A.M. (2020). Pilgrimage as a mode of inquiry: the Oklahoma City bombing memorial as an entangled place of education. *Journal of Peace Education*, 17(3), 283–307.

- <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400201.2020.1808778>
- Bannister, M. (Host). (2017, February 8). Turning myself into a comic superhero [Audio podcast episode]. In *Outlook*. BBC.  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p04rhbk9>
- Cartwright, M. (2019, July 25). *Apollo*. World History Encyclopedia.  
<https://www.worldhistory.org/apollo/>
- Chatterjee, A. (2020). *2019 & 2020 report*. Penn Center for Neuroaesthetics (PCFN).  
<https://neuroaesthetics.med.upenn.edu/neuroaesthetics/assets/user-content/documents/reports/pcfn-report-2019-and-2020.pdf>
- de Leeuw, S. (2017). Putting calls into action: Treating Aboriginal patients in collaboration with Indigenous healers and elders. *Can Fam Physician*, 63(1), 56–59.  
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5257223/>
- Doll Jr, W. E. (1993). *A post-modern perspective on curriculum*. Teachers College Press.
- Fancourt, D. & Finn, S. (2019). *What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being?: A scoping review* (Health Evidence Network Synthesis Program Report 67). World Health Organization.  
<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/329834>
- Fuchs-Knill, M. & Knill, P. (2015). *Aesthetic responsibility in expressive arts*. EGS Press.  
[www.expressivearts.egs.edu/files/ugd/9acca4600a35f65e3949c68f9374e929b86762.pdf](http://www.expressivearts.egs.edu/files/ugd/9acca4600a35f65e3949c68f9374e929b86762.pdf)
- George, D. (n.d.). *Dan George: Native American sayings*. Famous Quotes – Famous Sayings  
<https://quotes.wordpress.com/2006/08/31/chief-dan-george-native-american-sayings/>
- Gong, C. (2014, August 1). Music therapy in Chinese medicine. *The Edge*.  
<https://www.edgemagazine.net/2014/08/musical-therapy-in-chinese-medicine/>
- Greene, M. (2001). *Variations on a blue guitar*. Teachers College Press.
- Harris, K. (n.d.) *Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy*.  
<https://faculty.fiu.edu/~harrisk/Notes/Aesthetics/Apollonian-%20Dionysian%20Dichotomy.htm>
- Hart, T. (2018). Beauty and learning. In J.P. Miller, K. Nigh, M.J. Binder, B. Novak, & S. Crowell (Eds.), *International handbook of holistic education* (pp. 25–32). Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315112398>
- Ho, D. (2017). *Music, medicine, and happiness*. Interlude.  
<https://interlude.hk/music-medicine-happiness/>
- Johnson, A. (2023). Holistic learning theory: Not just a philosophy. *Journal of Contemplative and Holistic Education*, 1(2), 1–9.  
<https://doi.org/10.25035/jche.01.02.03>
- Levine, S.K., Knill, P.J., & Levine, E.G. (2004). *Principles and practices of expressive arts therapy: Toward a therapeutic aesthetics*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Malaguzzi, L. (2022). *One hundred languages* (L. Gandini, Trans.). Regio Emilia Approach

<https://www.reggiochildren.it/en/reggio-emilia-approach/100-linguaggi-en/>

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*.

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pilgrimage>

Micunovic, I. (2021, July). *The healing power of music*. Meer Wellness.

<https://www.meer.com/en/66276-the-healing-power-of-music>

Miller, J.P. (2005). Holistic learning. In J.P. Miller, S., Karsten, D. Denton, D. Orr, & I.C.

Kates (Eds.), *Holistic learning and spirituality in education: Breaking new ground*. State University of New York Press.

Miller, J.P. (2022). Schools inspired by the holistic curriculum. *Holistic Education Review* 2(2), 1–8.

<https://her.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/her/article/view/2287/2291>

Psychology Today. (2022). *Expressive arts therapy*.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapy-types/expressive-arts-therapy>

Sayers, J. (2004). Healing aesthetics: Kristeva through Stokes. *Theory and Psychology*, 14(6), 777–795.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354304048106>

Scottish Centre for Geopoetics. (n.d.). What is Geopoetics? Scottish Centre for Geopoetics.

<https://www.geopoetics.org.uk/what-is-geopoetics/>

Scruton, S. (2022). *Aesthetics*. Britannica.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/aesthetics>

Spark, M. (1961). *The prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. HarperCollins

Toth, J. (2017). *The Navajo concept of hozho: Living in harmony*. Bahai Teachings.

<https://bahaiteachings.org/navajo-concept-hozho-living-harmony/>

Walter, J. (2021). *Domestic violence*.

<https://tulsa.okstate.edu/site-files/documents/writing-contest/violence.pdf>

## Author Bio

**Jon L. Smythe** is an Assistant Professor of Curriculum Studies at Oklahoma State University. He began his academic journey as an English Teacher in Cameroon, Africa where he taught from 1996 to 1998. Surrounded by the natural beauty of rural Cameroon and nourished by the wit and generosity of the Cameroonian community, the experience proved foundational in developing his beliefs about education. These include the importance of human relationships, the necessity for imagination and improvisation, the imperative of living in harmony with nature, the pleasure of engaging the world through each of the senses, the value of laughter, and the need for connecting with the divine. Today, Smythe envisions curriculum as aesthetic, spiritual, holistic, and healing—a space that embodies both play and work, intuition and logic, ugliness and beauty, and both the impermanent and the enduring.