

Introduction to the Conference Proceedings

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Abstract

Ashwani Kumar's introduction to the “*HER CONTRIBUTIONS: Conference Proceedings*” from the Engaging with Meditative Learning in Teaching, Learning, and Research: A Free International Online Conference.

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Introduction

I am very pleased to be able to share the conference proceedings of Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research: A Free International Online Conference. The conference was hosted in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada from August 16th to 18th, 2022. In this introduction to the conference proceedings, I will share how the conference was conceptualized, why meditative inquiry and other holistic approaches to teaching are significant in the contemporary world, what happened at the conference, and how participants responded.

I would like to begin this introduction with a land acknowledgment. Nova Scotia is the unceded, ancestral territory of the Mi'kmaq people, and it is traditionally known as *Mi'kma'ki*. Over my years here, I have come to learn about so many

profound and wonderful aspects of Mi'kmaq culture from my students and community members, and I have noted many remarkable connections between Mi'kmaq culture and my work on meditative inquiry, as well as the spiritual philosophies that inform it. Many of my Indigenous students have shared that they find the meditative inquiry approach to education closely connected to Indigenous worldviews. Some commonly shared themes between meditative inquiry and Indigenous views include the importance of self-understanding and mutually respectful and reciprocal relationship between individuals and society, and between human beings and nature; the value of considerate listening and dialogue; the need for leading spiritually rich and vibrant lives; and the value of offering holistic education to children and youth. These themes, as well as many more, were

discussed by the presenters and participants in this conference.

Since publishing my first book, *Curriculum as Meditative Inquiry* (2013), in which I introduced the concept of meditative inquiry and its significance for the educational experience, I have further deepened and expanded the ideas related to it through my theorizing and practice. Over time, I have used it as an approach to explore curriculum, teaching, music, and dialogue itself, writing articles and books and offering many presentations on the many and various pathways I followed in my explorations (e.g., Kumar, 2018; Kumar & Downey, 2018, 2019; Kumar & Acharya, 2021). The enthusiastic feedback and expressions of interest I received over the years inspired me to invite others to write on their own explorations related to meditative inquiry, leading to the edited volume, *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research: Realizing Transformative Potentials in Diverse Contexts* (Kumar, 2022), published by Routledge in its Studies in Curriculum Theory series. The positive experience of working with the authors in that meditative, dialogic journey of creation was the inspiration behind this conference; a space in which participants could listen to people describe their own ideas related to meditative inquiry and engage in reflective dialogue on it.

I will go into more detail regarding the goals of the conference below, but put briefly, the key intention was to create a dialogical space for participants to learn about meditative inquiry and its connection with other holistic approaches as explored by the contributors in the edited collection. My aim was to invite a group of additional scholars, practitioners, and artists to share their impressions of the value and significance of meditative inquiry in diverse

contexts. We would then engage participants in thought-provoking presentations and discussions to stimulate their own exploration of meditative inquiry. Through these activities, I hoped to inspire further investigation into the broad applicability of meditative inquiry in various fields.

The conference was held over the course of three days, August 16th to 18th 2022, and was comprised of online presentations and discussions, and an in-person celebratory cultural event on the final evening (August 18). It was hosted at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU), and it was funded through a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Exchange Grant. The conference featured more than 55 speakers from a diverse range of backgrounds and fields, including contributors to the scholarly edited collection. There were about 400 registrants for the conference, and attendance numbers were high for all sessions. A website was created as a communication platform for meditative inquiry, featuring web pages devoted to the conference program, presenter biographies, and short abstracts. They can now be found in the archive section of the website at <https://meditativeinquiry.wixsite.com/ashwanikumar>. The video recordings of all the conference sessions were also posted on my YouTube channel. They can be accessed at https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLfVjDB_dQhEomgiYYmBJKj1nvD1oGBwaf

What is Meditative Inquiry?

As I described it in the Introduction to the edited collection:

The way of meditative inquiry is not new; it has always existed. . . The individuals, traditions, and communities from different parts of the world who focus on exploring

truth, beauty, and sacredness from deep within, are all followers of this quest.

Meditative inquiry is the name that I have used to describe all that this quest entails based on my own existential, spiritual, academic, creative, and pedagogical explorations. In meditative inquiry, it is not enough to read and quote what others have said before, no matter how compelling their insights are. While one can read and reflect on what others have said—I have done so myself by delving into traditions and philosophies from India and other parts of the world—the understanding only deepens and takes root in one's being when the search goes deeper than mere cognitive levels. While rooted in our traditions, in this collection the contributors and I speak from our own experience and learning. . . .

Meditative inquiry is the art of understanding oneself and one's relationship to people and the world. It is an existential process through which each one of us discovers our own truths through living life wakefully, meditatively, and creatively as we interact with people, knowledge, and the world within and around us. (Kumar, 2022, p. xix)

Meditative inquiry is a holistic concept and approach to teaching, learning, researching, creating, and living. It involves an exploration of the self and of all the relational connections we each have with everything around us, socially, environmentally, ecologically, economically, politically, and culturally (Kumar, 2013, 2019, 2022; Kumar & Acharya, 2021; Kumar & Downey, 2018, 2019). Given its emphasis on relaxation and awareness, the meditative inquiry approach is uniquely responsive to the fear-ridden and anxious ethos that has emerged and intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, because meditative inquiry centralizes connecting with nature at a

deeper level, it can promote an ecologically conscious mindset sorely needed in this era of climate crises (Kumar, 2013, 2019, 2022).

Meditative inquiry is not a strict set of rules or steps; it is an underlying approach for addressing the exploration of any topic, in any field, by reflecting upon seven key principles as I outlined in the Introduction to the meditative inquiry edited volume (Kumar, 2022, p. xxiv):

- Questioning deeply about everything without fear
- Critiquing social injustice, oppression, and discrimination
- Celebrating the freedom to think, to observe, to express, and to be
- Cultivating awareness of the ways one thinks, feels, and acts
- Partaking and rejoicing in the creative flow of life
- Understanding relationships and connecting with people and nature deeply
- Participating in dialogue with oneself and others honestly and authentically

These principles make it clear that understanding relationships and participating in dialogue are part of the very fabric of meditative inquiry, facilitated through a deeper inquiry into self, relationships, and society. The inspiration for this conference stemmed from the same thinking that led me to ask fellow scholars to contribute to the book: a desire for deepening understanding through shared experience. The primary purpose of this free, largely online conference was to raise awareness of, promote engagement with, and inspire further explorations of the theory and practice of meditative inquiry and the multifaceted experiences of it that are encompassed in the edited book, *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research*.

Goals of the Conference

The conference offered the opportunity for contributors to the edited collection—the focus of the conference—to share their engagement with meditative inquiry in relation to their own academic, philosophical, artistic, spiritual, and cultural perspectives. It also featured presentations from other invited scholars, practitioners, and artists, who shared their thoughts on the significance of the book and meditative inquiry for teaching, learning, and research in their own diverse contexts. The conference created a dialogical space for attendees to learn about meditative inquiry and investigate its implications for their own unique settings. The dialogical meditative inquiry process (Kumar & Downey, 2018, 2019; Kumar & Fischer, 2021; Kumar et al., 2021) that guided the development of the edited collection was also a guiding principle for this conference. This conference provided a conversational atmosphere where presenters and attendees could engage with one another in open-minded, meditative, and holistic ways to learn about and from each other's perspectives. On the last day of the conference, we had an in-person reception featuring a poetry recitation and musical performances from various traditions, highlighting the links between meditative inquiry, cultural practices, and creative expression.

The conference aimed to offer all participants an opportunity to learn about the meaning and significance of meditative inquiry. Like the meditative inquiry collection, this conference created a dialogical space for African, Asian, Buddhist, Indigenous, and Western scholars, teachers, artists, and students to engage with the idea of meditative inquiry from their distinctive perspectives. This enabled a multifaceted

exploration of meditative inquiry with regard to vitally important concepts and themes including poetic inquiry, critical discourse analysis, arts-based research, Africentric perspectives, Indigenous worldviews, dispute resolution, and trauma-informed practice, among others. The conference also offered a forum for schoolteachers and university professors to share insights into how the principles of meditative inquiry can be incorporated into varied curricular and pedagogical settings and, thereby, further enrich and expand the growing movement towards holistic approaches to teaching and learning.

The conference was organized to offer valuable perspectives and practices for scholars interested in exploring and adopting the principles of meditative inquiry in their specific fields and research settings. It focused on the promotion of aesthetic engagement with the notion of meditative inquiry and offered a free and accessible online platform where interested individuals were able to explore a diversity of perspectives relating to principles of meditative inquiry. My hope was that the range of topics would inspire and assist educators—including those working in curriculum theory, holistic education, foundations of education, and peace education—and the interdisciplinary discussion will serve as a resource for scholars wishing to incorporate the notion of meditative inquiry in fields beyond education.

At the Conference

The meditative inquiry conference featured diverse and engaging panels around key themes from the edited collection and were made up of a variety of scholars, teachers, students, and practitioners from countries such as India,

Australia, Italy, the United States, and Canada. The speakers offered their perspectives of meditative inquiry as it relates to their own field of interest, including philosophy, psychology, social work, community development, law, religious studies, education, and science among others. As mentioned above, the conference invited an engagement with a wide variety of topics and perspectives in relation to meditative inquiry including intersectional identity, Indigeneity, aesthetic sensibility, higher education, teacher education, psychotherapy, and philosophical counseling, among others.

The conference began on the 16th of August with opening remarks from the Associate Vice President of Research at MSVU, Jacqueline Gahagan; the Dean of Education at MSVU, Antony Card; and the Editor at Routledge, Alice Salt. Offerings on the first day included two introductory presentations by myself (book editor and conference chair) and the illustrator of the edited book, Adam Garry Podolski. Later in the day, an interview-style conversation took place between William Pinar and I to explore meditative inquiry and its key principles.

Apart from these contributions, the rest of the conference was organized into panel sessions of three or four people, offering presentations on shared themes. Discussion and question and answer sessions involving all participants took place after each panel. All the sessions of the conference began with a meditative exercise by one of the panelists.

The first day included three panel discussions by book contributors, journal editors, and contemplative education scholars. In the first keynote panel, Michael Corbett, Kent den Heyer, Lisa Merriweather, and Jack Miller discussed the

contributions of meditative inquiry to the field of education. The journal editors, Paul Freedman and Lauren Tien, Helen Lees, Carlo Ricci, and Teresa Strong-Wilson, discussed opportunities for publications related to contemplative approaches in the journals that they edit, namely, *Holistic Education Review*, *Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives*, *the Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning*, and *McGill Education Journal*. Lastly, Ehaab Abdou, Alexandra Fidyk, Martin Morrison, and Darlene St-George explored meditative inquiry in relation to holistic, aesthetic, contemplative, and culturally responsive education.

The second day of the conference included four panels made up of book contributors, and one panel by public school teachers. The first panel comprised Adrian Downey, Christina Flemming, and Chris McCaw and John Quay; they spoke about growth mindset, contemplation, and autoethnography in relation to meditative inquiry. Vikas Baniwal, Krista Ritchie and Paul Stemmler, and Rajean Willis then offered their contemplations on the themes of dialogue, self-actualization, and trauma-informed practice vis-à-vis meditative inquiry. Susan Brigham, Diane Obed, and David Sable presented diverse cultural perspectives, including Africentricity, Indigenous wisdom, and Buddhism, in connection with meditative inquiry. In the final book contributors panel, Nayha Acharya, Mohamed Kharbach, and Michael Cosgrove discussed meditative inquiry in the context of law and dispute resolution, critical discourse analysis, and high school teaching. To round off the day, public school teachers Alexandra Barclay, Dawn Erley, Carolyn Prest, Yelena Smith, and Jack Ward shared their experiences of engaging with meditative inquiry in elementary and secondary schools.

On the third day, the panels represented a variety of perspectives from a range of scholars, practitioners, and community organizers. To begin, Angie Kolen, Leigh-Ann Macfarlane, Suzanne Le-May Sheffield, and Gavan Watson engaged the audience with questions around the significance of meditative inquiry for teaching and learning in higher education. Balaganapati Devarakonda, Michael Fisher, and Kelly Resmer then discussed meditative inquiry in relation to philosophical counseling, fear, and chemistry teaching, respectively. In the final online panel, Laurie Cook, Lindsay Leighton, Stephanie McDonald, and Neeraj Verma shared their reflections on meditative inquiry in light of their experiences in community work, neuroscience, mental health, and medicine.

To close the conference, there was an in-person celebratory reception and cultural evening at MSVU (Rosaria Multi-Purpose Room) that was attended by about 75 attendees. This event offered the opportunity for presenters and attendees located in or around Halifax to meet and interact with each other face-to-face, and it featured an immersive and multicultural-aesthetic experience of meditative inquiry, including: a guided meditation, a poetry offering, and four musical performances. The evening featured Ashley Julian-Rikhana (Indigenous flute), an Indian classical music ensemble (Ashwani Kumar, Nayha Acharya, and Ketan Kulkarni), poetry (Emiyah Simmonds), African drumming (Sobaz Benjamin), and an Indian classical music soloist (Arrol Subbaiah also known as Arrol Corelli). The 75 attendees also enjoyed snacks and a meal prepared through MSVU Catering. The event was video recorded and is available at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9sxsR2luWwg&list=PLfVjDB_dQhEomgiYYmBJKj1nvD1oGBwaf&index=17

Overall, the meditative inquiry conference facilitated discussion of the meditative inquiry approach and contributed to the growing movement towards inclusive, holistic, and culturally responsive pedagogies. The presentations by the contributors on their book chapters, along with other invited presentations, enriched the scholarly landscape of curriculum and pedagogy by introducing methods, philosophies, and practices of education entrenched in non-Eurocentric cultures and worldviews. By doing so, it also promoted the significance of non-Eurocentric educational values and approaches. The conference also augmented and diversified educational research by demonstrating the significance of meditative inquiry and other holistic approaches from multi/interdisciplinary, international, intercultural, and aesthetic perspectives, highlighting their applicability in varied pedagogical and curricular settings. This multifaceted discussion invited all in attendance to deepen their knowledge of themselves and their relationality to nature, culture, politics, and the economy, thereby enhancing the rigor and reflective depth of how each person engages with teaching, learning, and research in their own specific contexts.

In Closing

The success of the meditative inquiry conference was possible due to contributions from many individuals, and I would like to offer my thanks to them all. First, a moment of gratitude must be extended to authors who contributed to the meditative inquiry collection, as well as to all the distinguished scholars and practitioners who kindly agreed to share their time and expertise with us during the conference. I would also like to extend a big thank you to all conference attendees; this conference could not have been a

success without their enthusiastic and active participation. My thanks, too, go to Alice Salt at Routledge (publishers of the edited collection), who generously agreed to supply e-copies of the book to the many presenters and two hard copies for door prizes at the cultural evening as well as offering thoughtful opening remarks on the first day of the conference. I would also like to thank the MSVU SSHRC Exchange Grant that funded this conference, thereby facilitating a knowledge exchange and mobilization activity that brought together scholars, practitioners, teachers, and community members to engage in discussion and build community. Special thanks to the Dean of Education, Dr. Antony Card, for supporting us by offering funds to meet the gap in funding to offset the cost of food and technology.

This grant, and additional funding from Inter-University Doctoral Program of Nova Scotia, enabled me to have the assistance of three PhD students, Bonnie Petersen, Alexandra Barclay, and Iain McLeod, as well as some additional help from Lubaba Sanjana, James Caron, and Erica MacLean from Mount Saint Vincent University throughout this endeavor. I thank them all for their hard work and commitment.

The event would not have been possible without the support of Mount Saint Vincent University and specifically IT&S, Conference Services, the Research Office, and Accounts, among others. My thank you to all the staff members who supported us during the conference.

Finally, I extend my heartfelt thanks to Renee Owen, Paul Freedman, Emilie McGeary, Annie Rapperport, and Sophia Lorusso, editors of the *Holistic Education Review*, for providing a forum for these conference proceedings in their journal.

It is my sincere hope that these conference proceedings—in the form of abstracts and video recordings of each of the conference sessions—will help us further our goal of introducing a wide audience to the educational and philosophical principles of meditative inquiry and their relevance for today's world. I would like to conclude this introduction to the conference proceedings with the following hopeful, prayerful, and evocative statements with which I concluded my Epilogue to the Meditative Inquiry edited collection (Kumar, 2022, p. 291):

*May our meditative inquiries transform ourselves, our relationships, and the world!
May our pursuits bring about and spread creativity, beauty, and awareness!
May our work promote peace, harmony, and compassion!*

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- inquiry to conduct subjective and intersubjective qualitative research. He is the author of two scholarly books: *Curriculum as Meditative Inquiry* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) and *Curriculum in International Contexts: Understanding Colonial, Ideological, and Neoliberal Influences* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). He is also the editor of *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research: Realizing Transformative Potentials in Diverse Contexts* (Routledge, 2022). He has served as the President of the Arts Researchers and Teachers Society, Canada. His book *Curriculum as Meditative Inquiry* was chosen as an Outstanding Academic Title by Choice Reviews in 2015. His co-authored paper, "Teaching as Meditative Inquiry: A Dialogical Exploration," which describes his pedagogical philosophy and practice, received the Outstanding Publication in Curriculum Studies Award from The Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies in 2019. He is also the recipient of the Mount Saint Vincent University President and Vice President's Advanced Career Teaching Award 2022 and the University of British Columbia Faculty of Education's Alumni Educator of the Year Award 2022.

Author Bio

Ashwani Kumar is Professor of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University (Halifax, Canada). His teaching and research focus on meditative inquiry, which is a self-reflective and aesthetic approach to teaching, learning, researching, creating, and living. He has conceptualized several key curricular and pedagogical concepts, namely, curriculum as meditative inquiry, teaching as meditative inquiry, and music as meditative inquiry. He has also developed a contemplative research methodology called dialogical meditative