

Life as/of a Holistic Educator

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Abstract

This dialogue-based reflective essay examines the lives of holistic educators. It underscores the importance of educators embodying holism whereby holism is understood as an epistemology that supports educators embracing a way of living and being for themselves. It explores how teachers embody personal values to walk the talk, question and decondition themselves to develop new visions and approaches to education, and are engaged in lifelong learning of self-transformation. Ultimately, starting with inner-work and self-transformation, the growing consciousness guides interactions with others, the pursuit of one's dharma, and contributions to the larger society.

Keywords: *holistic education, contemplative education, teacher professional development, embodying holistic epistemology, deconditioning, lifelong learning*

“The day I stop learning and growing inwards I will stop coming to the school”

~SriIa an educator at Mirambika Free Progress School

Introduction

There has been a growing interest in holistic education with several schools and, at times, national policies calling for holistic education (NEP, 2020). There are varied definitions of holistic education — some that call for education of all parts of an individual across different spatial-temporal boundaries, others that call for the education of the child as a whole (Lin et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2018; The Mother, 1977), and more indigenous models that embody the

understanding of interconnectedness and call for educating the whole child who is situated within the larger whole (of humanity, nature, and the universe; Tagore described in Forbes, 2000; Patel, 2023). We resonate with the latter two.

Educators and their ways of learning, living and being are central to holistic education. Holistic educators themselves would need to fully embrace a new understanding of knowledge/wisdom, and the values of empathy, compassion, non-judgment and open mindedness. Holistic education is largely brought about by shared lived experiences (Patel, 2023), and where the role of the holistic educator is to offer students this real connection to a new way of living and being. It is essential that teachers not

just model behaviours but rather walk the talk, not as a temporary mask for performativity (Bai et al., 2023; Patel & Cremin, forthcoming; Patel & Kester, 2023). This reminds me of Parker Palmer's well-known line- "We teach who we are". But then what does it mean to be a holistic educator and what does embodying holism ontologically and epistemologically mean — as a way of knowing, living and being?

Embodying personal values

Maya: When I reflect upon what being a holistic educator is in practice for me, I believe that it really comes down to having a keen interest in the parallel journeys of developing self-knowledge, and (through this growing understanding of oneself) becoming more open to truly knowing and connecting with other human beings. To question where one's thoughts and feelings are coming from in relation to the other, being both curious to learn and get to know each student, and at the same time allowing students the space and autonomy to follow what interests them. With a group of students, it becomes clear that there is no one way that suits all, and each learning journey is unique. The diversity in interests, developmental needs, and challenges shows that a holistic education cannot be set against standardised goals, and instead, the path taken and experiences along the way become the aim of such an education. Without having a predetermined outcome or path, being a holistic educator (or parent) comes with its challenges. We are so used to education being something known, that across the globe, to a certain extent, everyone has a shared understanding and experience of schooling, the role of the teacher, and the content and aim of mainstream education. Holistic education requires a very different outlook and mind-set, where everything can become personal, outcomes take time and/or

may not be visible, and role boundaries are erased. Importantly, this requires to allow space to not know everything, which perhaps is the biggest work for the individuals embracing this path. Such epistemic humility – recognition of different ways of knowing and of limitation of one's knowledge – fosters a sense of openness, curiosity, and lifelong learning.

Jwalin: There are two very powerful ideas that you refer to that I would like to expand upon - process orientation and autonomy - both of which are central to holistic education (Patel & Cremin, forthcoming; Patel 2023; Thapan, 2018). And therefore, it is essential that teachers, schools, and educational systems embody these values. For example, about process orientation, I recall a quote from a teacher at Patha Bhavana, Shantiniketan. The teacher paraphrasing Tagore mentioned "If you water a plant and then go and see if it has flowered, then the plant will have failed. It will flower at its own time". Teachers across various holistic schools in India, commonly believe that most important educational outcomes such as sensitivity, empathy, and compassion, cannot be measured and at times may manifest much later in life (at times in school and many a times thereafter). Additionally, there is a recognition that all processes are influenced by numerous conditions and factors, frequently outside one's control, and therefore, one should only invest in the process (which is in one's control). Furthermore, in some cases, teachers also believed that each of them should follow their dharma, which is to care, love, and work with the students as equals. These three ideas inherently require a different approach to education, a process-oriented approach rather than an outcome-oriented one. Generally, process-oriented approaches lead to much better outcomes, however, we call for adopting

process-oriented approaches for the sake of the processes in and of themselves.

I would also like to take the opportunity to dive deeper into autonomy; foregrounding autonomy, as a process, for all in a school can have its own challenges because different individuals may have different interests and approaches (students may want to study different topics, teachers may have varying educational visions, and parents may have varying hopes...). While some might consider this as dilution of vision, in my experience most of the schools saw it as a beautiful weave of different approaches and priorities (Patel, 2023). Creating an ethos of autonomy for all fosters appreciation of diversity. It can become a little complex when some teachers may have very different visions (mainstream and holistic); however, if schools promote open dialogue and contemplation this allows for teachers (and students) to develop new visions and approaches, sense of agency and trusteeship, and a deep sense of responsibility (Frost, 2017; MacBeath et al., 2020; Patel, 2023). Maya, in your experience, how have you worked with educators from diverse backgrounds?

Maya: I think working to find unity in diversity is probably the biggest challenge for humanity, but also an essential aspect of education to really address education for peace and sustainable development at its root causes. This is not something that can be taught solely theoretically, it has to be lived, and is the work of the holistic educator. The international township Auroville in South India was created as a place to research this through real life, by putting together people from every corner of the world. I have had the great opportunity to be a part of The Learning Community, which was created to research how to redesign education for this purpose. The rich diversity in our team of educators and the families we work with offers constant real-life possibilities

to tackle all the challenges that come with it, often bringing visibility to the different expectations, cultural influences, varying understandings, and difficulties in communication. This creates space for contemplation and offers opportunities to work on inner expansion, open-mindedness, and inclusion – constantly taking us closer to the common vision and unity that lies at the core, individually, collectively and in harmony with the environment. We live in a time where there is often a disconnect between ourselves and the fragmented world around us. We try to reduce ourselves (and others) to stereotypes, categories, and labels, such as our gender and race, profession, or other. In school we perceive children in the same way, by their age, class, grades, and family situation. It is also by these measures that we tend to judge others. When we as educators begin to look at ourselves beyond these outer stereotypical classifications, and turn inward, there is a whole universe to discover. I find it interesting how Krishnamurti (1969) describes this as looking at the projection we make of ourselves (or of others). It's like an image of what we should be, or think we are, painting a picture that actually prevents us from looking deeper. So, to come back to your question Jwalin, when working with educators from diverse backgrounds, in The Learning Community we always come back to our work with non-judgment. I have observed that when within a team of educators, we engage in non-judgmental, active reflection, we become more able to embrace the richness of diversity that lies within each other, and also of parents and children, as the outer stereotypical classifications lose their importance.

Jwalin: This is really interesting to hear, to me, it sounds like you are embodying a holistic epistemology as a way of living and being. I have come to believe that as holistic educators we need

to learn to embody holistic ways of living and being ourselves. Such an epistemology has multiple characteristics including 1) shift from monoculturalism to hetero-culturalism based on appreciation of diversity (rather than a mere tolerance of it) and recognition of the impotence of autonomy for all (Patel, 2023; Santos, 2018; Shiva, 1993, 1999); 2) a shift from anthropocentric to eco-centric approaches to life (Cajete, 1994; Mani, 2013; Patel & Cremin, forthcoming; Patel & Ehrenzeller, forthcoming; Shiva, 2012); 3) recognition and appreciation of interconnectedness (within oneself and in the larger world) thereby leading to more harmonious relations (Mani, 2013; Patel, 2023); and 4) understanding that learning happens everywhere and all the time, thereby leading to richer learning experiences for students and lifelong learning for teachers (further described below).

Deconditioned educator

Jwalin: Another aspect that is essential is for a teacher to be open to new ideas, question old set patterns, and decondition one's own ways of thinking, feeling, living, and being.

'De-conditioning' is a term coined by Krishnamurti (2000) who resonating with Foucault (1977) and Freire (1970), calls individuals and teachers to recognise, question and counter 'societal conditioning'. A teacher much like everyone else is constantly influenced by one's past experiences, one's ways of thinking and prejudices, and societal expectations and conditioning; therefore, it is essential that an educator constantly question and break away from these patterns. To identify and process societal conditioning within oneself requires the educator to engage in contemplative practices. Deconditioning can allow for openness-openness to working with different types of students, evolving needs of a given time, and to learning. Buddhist philosophers (Chödrön, 2012)

advocate for Samaya; a vow to openness and acceptance of all people, situations, and emotions. Such an openness leads teachers to engage in constant learning and adaptation (further described below). Teachers frequently believed that when systems, processes, and people become too fixed or become 'crystalized' then they are dead. Such deconditioning can be fostered by various practices like dialogue; however, they are underpinned by active contemplation – changing how one's mind operates requires seeing and recognizing one's patterns. In certain circles of holistic educators and spiritual practitioners I have come across the notion of "attention that transforms", that is witnessing and becoming aware of how the mind operates immediately transforms it.

"I have been a part of a community of practice for holistic educators since 2020. The community is centred on dialogue, reflection, and action research. Over the years, we have had several discussions where participants have agreed to disagree. I believe that the members have an underlying respect for each other and while they may vehemently disagree with each other, they continue to hold each other in a positive light. It is nice to see that what started as interactions between strangers has become a place and space where there is a deep recognition of plurality and autonomy. This contrasts with the typical 'my way or the highway' attitude. Additionally, as a participant, within the community I have frequently felt okay with not knowing something. At times I have found myself reflecting upon some difficult questions (regarding my own practices) and while extremely discomforting, it felt okay."
~ Jwalin's reflections on participating in a community of holistic educators.

Maya: I very much resonate with this and would like to extend this idea of deconditioning to

questioning mainstream educational visions, systems, structures, and processes. To reflect on what this means in education today, teachers will need to actively question processes, systems and methods used. Becoming critical requires time for reflection, both individually and collectively. Holistic schools prioritise such time as very valuable for both teacher and school development. In mainstream education the fixed national curriculum that is delivered by the teacher is portioned out over a certain number of years for efficiency the children are sorted by age into grades. This way of learning is disconnected from reality and does not allow students to appreciate the interconnectedness in the world. Additionally, it does not support students to connect to themselves, their own self-motivation, and curiosity to learn. In such a system the teacher's work is to reproduce an existing package, and not to question it. Instead, holistic educators are involved in constant questioning of norms, contemplation on one's practices, and self-transformation.

This approach to the role of the teacher defines a main difference between the holistic and mainstream educator. Irrespective of which school of thought that takes a holistic approach, be it the self-formation processes of Scandinavian/German education (Ylimaki & Uljens, 2017), the principles of Integral Education of Sri Aurobindo (1972), the liberation of the individual as argued by Freire (1970), educating the human being to live a deeper life as described by Krishnamurti (1969), or the education of independence of Maria Montessori (1972) – all have in common the foundation of freedom. Only with freedom will there be space to be oneself, thereby allowing for a deeper understanding of oneself, self-transformation, and a new approach to education. The more we see and understand

oneself, the more it also opens up our ability to see others in a new way. As described by Joshi (2010), the teacher has to have a certain maturity and growth of their own personality, to have something to contribute towards forming the personality of others. For deconditioning to happen, the educator needs time for contemplation and reflection, to experience the freedom to leave behind formations of past conditioning, to question what educational systems and structures serve, and what values they would like to build. Only when the education connects to this space of inner freedom, can such an intention of freedom also be offered to their students.

Jwalin: Krishnamurti (2013), hoped for, supported, and pushed educators to question everything they did and their underlying educational visions. He called for them to actively reflect, contemplate, and challenge what one did. I believe that freedom from pre-set visions of education and questioning the vision, purpose, systems, and practices can bring forth an alternative vision for education. Also, the 'live enquiry', a continued and active enquiry, of these questions allows one to adapt and evolve to changing the context (Patel, 2023). I believe that such a 'live enquiry' is essential to finding one's dharma and recognizing what really interests someone. Most of the holistic educators that I have interacted with have frequently referred to pursuing educating children as a form of their dharma. Additionally, it encouraged them to engage more meaningfully in education, social change activism, self-transformation, and spiritualism. I have held onto a comment from a teacher at Mahatma Gandhi International School – she hoped that through her various pursuits she could contribute to making the Earth a more beautiful place. Engaging with educating children, social activism,

and/or self-transformation as a form of dharma lead to very deep intrinsic motivation – they engaged in the processes because they saw it as a purpose of their lives.

Maya: I think what you mention is a key reason for being a holistic educator – it is not a teaching job, but a wish to contribute towards changing the world through a growing consciousness about oneself and the interconnectedness within the world. This requires ongoing contemplative work for the educator. Contemplation, for us, is a self-transformative practice that draws on meditation, reflection and introspection and aims to bring about self-realization and manifest peaceful and sustainable ways of living and being. It is a process of inner work that happens in a state of presence and centeredness. It is an exploration of values, purpose and meaning, leading to new understanding and a growing awareness of oneself, others, and the world.

Lifelong learner

Jwalin: I believe that both embodying personal values and deconditioning is an unending process. This resonates with the notion that holistic education is a lifelong process (for both students and teachers), wherein one constantly engages in processes of learning and transformation without being attached too far one may have reached within the journey. This encompasses both inner and outer learning. Notably, Srila, a teacher at Mirambika Free Progress School, commented that she would stop coming to the school when she stopped learning and growing inwards. This resonates with Bai, Cohen & Falkenberg (2023) who reflect on being constantly involved in ‘inner work’, a self-transformation process, within their respective contexts. Inner work is an ongoing and conscious and contemplative process of developing a deeper understanding of oneself and

engaging transforming one’s ways of knowing, living, and being. This notion of inner work resonates with Patel’s (2023) emphasis on teachers consciously working upon, learning, and embodying values and epistemologies of holism and Cajete’s (1999) contention that Indigenous education should be a life-long process bringing about harmonious living through reflection and introspection of experiences and participation in the community. Therefore, many holistic schools in India are perceived as lifelong learning centres, ashrams, and/or communities of holistic learning spaces. All educators are a part of and are expected to be engaged in constant learning, self-development, questioning the purpose of education, and some form of inner work. Maya, what did this look like at The Learning Community?

Maya: There is a real need for engaging in understanding oneself – stereotypes and prejudices one holds, one’s ways of seeing the world, one’s ways of living and being, exploring what drives certain thoughts, feelings, reactions and action, connecting with one’s soul. It is essential for it to become a conscious and active part of the “professional development” of the teacher. This ongoing work of contemplation enables one to process past conditioning and relate with the present realities. It will give the teacher the openness to see each child through an unconditioned lens. Auroville is quite a unique place for this, as it is dedicated for this work in every field of society, with special focus on unending education. The Learning Community is an educational research project, which focuses on the inner work of the educators and parents in order to open up the doors for a new education to manifest for the children. What Auroville offers is the freedom needed to allow this work to have precedence without the imposition of assessment

tools, curricular content, and performativity goals of mainstream education. Over the years the collective (and collective consciousness) has opened up a playground for exploration and discovery for the educators. When an active process starts to shape the work, a transformative culture comes to life, and with it educators find trust in each other to step out of comfort zones, experiment, become open-minded, inclusive and flexible, embrace challenges, and learn to grow from what the journey brings.

“In The Learning Community we emphasize contemplation and reflection as a method to develop self-knowledge, and to assess ongoing practices, systems and methods. We started this work during a time of great challenge, as we faced the conflict of hanging on to past conditioning and fear, while trying to find new ways of interpreting education in theory and practice. We needed to understand what in our human nature was resisting change, better understand individual and collective processes taking place, and find our source of inspiration, curiosity and creativity. For this purpose, we developed our reflection tool that we use with students, parents, and educators. One of our facilitators took it upon herself to sit with each of the other members of our team regularly, and through guided questions allow each one to express what was alive for them in that moment. By asking to follow up questions and digging deeper, these conversations offer us a much richer opportunity than journaling – through dialogue sharing ideas and gaining more clarity for oneself (and about oneself). Additionally, we document these and it allows the possibility for us to go back over time, discover shifts, and discover what led to growth”.

~ Maya’s sharing of the tool used to support an unending education of the educators at The Learning Community.

Jwalin: Many of holistic schools I have worked with prioritized and provided space and freedom to educators to pursue their own paths for inner work while creating supporting systems of discussion groups, reading groups, contemplation (like daily meditation circles, quiet spaces, and immersion in nature), systems of dialogue, active engagement in social change-making, communities of practices, and visits to other schools and ashram. It is important to highlight that contemplation (reflection and introspection) were seen as integral to embodying holistic epistemology as a way of living and being, self-transformation, and lifelong learning. This created a strong ethos of all stakeholders being engaged in learning (from nature, each other, and one’s ownself).

Conclusion

Conscious and active contemplative approaches underpin holistic educators’ ways of living and being. Reflective and contemplative approaches facilitate the embodiment of personal values, deconditioning one’s ways of living and being, and are integral to lifelong learning. Additionally, contemplation is not limited to practices but rather is an approach that educators adopt to their day to day lives. While engaging in practices like meditation for short spans of time can help; embracing contemplative ways of knowing and living 24/7 can facilitate humans becoming whole – deconditioning from set patterns, superseding artificial divides, healing from fragmentation and conflicts, and recognizing the interconnectedness with(in) the world. In other words, as holistic educators the process of holistic education then appears to be a lifelong journey of contemplative and conscious self-transformation. I highly doubt that we embody this contemplative states of consciousness 24/7. However, we have come to appreciate that being a holistic educator is about

consciously working to live differently and harmoniously for oneself due to the intrinsic value each of us place in it.

Some argue that holistic education is difficult and requires a massive transformation, but from a certain lens it is very simple; it begins with where one is at. Aurobindo states that education is to work from the near to the far, starting from where one is at. This calls for each stakeholder to engage in a process of contemplative self-transformation – understanding oneself, relating to each other, and recognizing the interconnectedness within nature and the world, and consciously engaging in transforming one's ways of knowing, living, and being (from fragmented, anthropocentric, and conditioned ways towards more holistic ones). The holistic educator chooses contemplative lifelong learning and conscious self-transformation to be their main work – starting with the inner work, allowing the growing self-knowledge and self-awareness to guide the interactions with others (children, colleagues, and parents).

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Maya Shakti Berggreen-Clausen is a specialist in education for sustainable development, working with applied research on the practice of Integral Education in Auroville. Her focus is on developing new educational practices, teacher training, models of school organization, and educational materials designed to support education for peace and sustainability. As manager of Auro-games, she also creates educational puzzles that support cognitive development, striving to bring creativity and problem-based learning into public education. Prior to her work in Auroville, she worked as a class teacher in public Montessori schools in Sweden.