

The Restorative and Reconnective Power of Holistic Education

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Abstract

All around us we are bearing witness to a crisis disconnection that is resulting in various forms of suffering. Widespread disconnection is resulting in an “epidemic” of loneliness and fewer friendships. The negative ramifications of these consequences on mental health are well documented (Franco 2022; Murthy 2020). Around the world, ideological polarization and extremism are increasing. Neighbors who once lived collaboratively, now readily dehumanize. In many countries, these tensions, rooted in fear, are erupting in violent acts. Yet, if we look, we also see striking examples of alternative nonviolent paths (Pape et al. 2024). At the environmental scale, the anthropocentric philosophies that perpetuate the myth that humans are “above” or apart from nature, are leading to unnatural forms of living which are unsustainable while the planet deteriorates (Lin and Oxford 2011). This open-themed issue of the *Holistic Education Review* brings together scholarship, lived experiences, and practical insights that seek to address these alarming trends. The pieces show us how we may heal divisions through reconnection and reimagination brought forth through holistic education approaches. Within the articles, an abundance of heartening and practical approaches are discussed. While some authors describe ways to reconnect with nature, others focus on how we can all work to reconnect mind with body towards more effective learning. Authors relate to readers the need to nurture curiosity, care, listening and dialogue as tools to reconnect and heal discord.

Keywords: *holistic education, healing divides, dialogue, listening, embodied learning, empathy, community engagement*

It is an honor to be invited to write the editorial for the 2024 fall open-themed issue. This open-themed issue invites our holistic education community into an exciting space of imagination in education. We welcome a variety of new voices to enrich our

discussions surrounding education and to widen the circle of scholarship to more accurately reflect all the wonderful approaches happening around the world. As we compiled the pieces and worked with authors, themes emerged. All of the discussions

surround the need for holistic education as a means to help our communities reconnect and restore relationships in increasingly divided times. The authors and editors agree—we are living through multiple crises that have the throughline of disconnection.

All around us we are bearing witness to a crisis disconnection that is resulting in various forms of suffering. Widespread disconnection is resulting in an “epidemic” of loneliness and fewer friendships. The negative ramifications of these consequences on mental health are well documented (Franco 2022; Murthy 2020). Around the world, ideological polarization and extremism are increasing. Neighbors who once lived collaboratively, now readily dehumanize. In many countries, these tensions, rooted in fear, are erupting in violent acts. Yet, if we look, we also see striking examples of alternative nonviolent paths (Pape et al. 2024). At the environmental scale, the anthropocentric philosophies that perpetuate the myth that humans are “above” or apart from nature, are leading to unnatural forms of living which are unsustainable while the planet deteriorates (Lin and Oxford 2011).

This issue is open-themed by design. We view this collection as a mosaic, bringing together and sharing a series of timely messages related to how holistic education in form and practice has the power to create resilience and hope in disconnected times. The authors share wisdom for many of the critical challenges of our times—division, fear, apathy, stress, and exhaustion. In addition, many pieces delve into the importance of restoring creativity, spirituality, awe, and wonder towards educational approaches that reconnect communities towards a flourishing future.

For this issue, the *HER* editorial team expanded the networks of outreach with the call for proposals

and were delighted by the many new authors who chose to answer the call. Many authors were excited to share how they view the links between their disciplines—scholarship and practice—as related to holistic education.

Beginning with addressing the imposed division of children with their spiritual sense of selves, Lyman et al. bring us *Children as Spiritual Beings: Restoring our Sense of Awe and Wonder*. In this piece, authors identify how “childhood is on the chopping block” with educational spaces and educators disconnecting them from play, from nature, and from the free time that is essential to listening to one’s self and finding one’s spark through the practice of wonder and discovery. They argue for holistic education techniques to be embraced and for teachers’ resistance to standardization and “hurrying” students along.

In a similar vein, we have Goksel and Khademhamedani, contributors from Sweden/Switzerland, and Iran bringing living examples of creative mindfulness and embodied holistic learning. Goksel writes in her article, *Embodied Ways of Knowing: Not Only Our Heads Go to School*, about the importance of experiential learning and play. Goksel works as a drama teacher and her experiences have led to the realization that drama is adding holistic depth to her students’ lives beyond the classroom or stage. Through her use of dramatic structures, Goksel creates the space and means for students to learn skills in empathy, critical thinking and how to connect with their “entire being” through the imaginative play of theater. She is able to model a way of being beyond the skill acquisition embedded in drama classes.

Further, Khademhamedani shows readers which embodied and holistic practices are proving most transformative for the students in her school in Iran. Her work, over the course of the year, has already had impacts felt on the individual student

level as well as throughout the school culture as well. She explains how holistic and mindfulness practices were a “foreign” concept in her work, but once reframed with language most familiar and integrated into other activities, were well received and sustained.

Encouraging further the role of teachers who model holistic ways of being as a way to improve the effectiveness of holistic education, Karas and Clark’s piece, *Being Present to Students: How Holistic Educators Communicate Presence*, six holistic educators are interviewed and share their wisdom regarding how to role model being connected to one’s soul as essential to stronger connections with others. Karas and Clark’s interviewees also speak to the positive impacts of students learning contemplative practices—an idea taken further in the fun *Experiential Learning in a Mindful Moshpit* community voices piece by Bimstein who relates many concepts of mindfulness through evoking imagery of communal participation at live music performances.

Jardine, a welcome returning contributor to *HER*, brings us the striking opening image of a blowing dandelion— lion’s teeth as a means to open our minds to wander about the landscapes of nature and childhood memory, and how wandering revisits key moments of kinship and holistic learning. By contrast, a new *HER* contributor, Bimstein, a former punk rocker and mayor, and current teacher, evokes a mosh pit image for readers to see mindfulness practices in a new and inventive way. The stark yet complementary contrasts brought forth by these creative pieces help cue our own imaginations in our scholarship and practice.

Another skill which hones both mindfulness and creativity is artistic improvisation. Moore’s piece, *The Role of Reflection in Musical Improvisation*, elucidates through an extensive literature review

how music education and the experiential learning of musical improvisation supports students’ social-emotional learning, mindfulness, and ability to be creative in interactive ways. Indeed, how often do we all, as educators, but also as humans, draw upon the skill of improvisation? I would argue that every day practice in improvisation provides a variety of benefits. The more practice we have in creative improvisation in structured ways, such as through music education, we will find the act of improvisation as beneficial and fun. This is a needed skill especially when societal norms that often laud strategic planning, leave gaps in our minds for knowing how to adapt to ever-changing realities. When planning and adaptiveness combine in holistic education approaches, wonderful ideas can take shape to help us navigate pressing challenges. One such challenge that remains top of mind for many in the *HER* community is how we, as humans, can live in improved understanding and relationships with the natural world of which we are a part of.

Latremouille and Bajer envelop us in rich ideas surrounding improved relationships between humans and nature. They ask us to collaboratively and caringly reimagine how we partner with nature in both the short- and long-term. Similarly, Vasko writes directly to how we, as educators, can lay foundations in our classroom communities for ecological sensitivity and response-ability. Vasko roots these big ideas in the local context of connecting a class to a neighborhood wildlife corridor that they chose to listen and engage with.

Taking a turn from the tangible world around us to the realm of spiritually, we have the piece from Handlarski who provides a useful analysis of the importance of maintaining spirituality in public school settings with a case being made for how spirituality is separate from religion. Michalec explores the possibilities of mysticism when it becomes democratized and available to all

educators as a means to connect at a deeper, more spiritual level.

As in past issues, we also include a transcribed interview between lead editors, Renee Owen and Paul Freedman and renowned holistic education scholar, Lisa Miller. Lisa Miller's illuminating interview compliments concepts in Handlarski and Michalec with her own work on the "awakened brain" and the neuropsychology of spirituality as it relates to building resilient school cultures. Like so many of the pieces, Miller's interview reiterates, yet again, the power of holistic approaches to enhance connectivity and perceive unity.

We also welcomed a piece from Tenam-Zemach et al. which provides some continued conversation through occasional HER articles that explore the various ways to observe and measure an inquiry model in K-12 education that advocates for holistic teacher evaluations.

This is an exciting time for holistic education. As our authors demonstrate, manifestations of holistic pedagogies can be found across disciplines and around the world. Importantly, within each context, the power of holistic practices in education are proving essential as tools for reconnection and healing, resilience and hope. We anticipate the power of the examples shared throughout this issue to provide inspiration, motivation, and useful tools for use in your schools, classrooms, and throughout each part of your learning life.

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