

Reflecting on the Social Justice and Equity in Holistic Education Collection

Debbie Chenet Millon, Senior Guest Editor

E-mail: peshamillon@gmail.com

Received July 2025

Accepted for publication July 2025

Published July 2025

Abstract

An introduction to the articles of the Spring 2025 “Social Justice and Equity in Holistic Education” issue of the Holistic Education Review, written by Senior Guest Editor Debbie Chenet Millon.

Keywords: *holistic education, social justice, equity, community, inclusion*

“How we do the work is as important as the work itself.” - Loretta Ross (2025)

Loretta Ross, scholar, activist, and feminist, reminds us that the process of doing social justice work is inseparable from its outcomes. When I heard her speak this past January, I felt in resonance as I reflected on the journey that led to this special themed issue on social justice and holistic education.

Nearly twenty months ago, I joined five extraordinary educator activists—each deeply rooted in their communities and in social justice education and practice—to begin shaping a vision for this issue. Our goal was to:

- Focus on social justice, equity, and healing as intentional outcomes of holistic education, as well as on ways holistic education is viewed and interpreted by diverse perspectives.

- Amplify the voices of authors and scholars from or working in communities of color, diverse language and cultural groups, and LGBTQ+, neurodiverse, disabled, or other marginalized communities.
- Highlight the need for scholarship that critiques and disrupts holistic practices that *neglect* justice-oriented solutions.
- Ask authors to discuss how they ensure their service is centering groups that have been historically relegated to the margins of our unjust society.

In other words, we sought different voices, stories, and research.

From the beginning, we agreed: *how* we worked together would matter as much as *what* we produced. Collaboration in our group of mostly non-white educators was grounded in intention and care. We opened meetings with honest check-ins. We celebrated milestones—a PhD defense, a keynote, new jobs. We held space for grief and

laughter, for the weight of the work and the joy of connection. And when the world's injustices found their way into our lives and work, as they inevitably did, we were reminded again why this themed issue was needed.

We rejected the productivity-at-all-costs mindset. Our special issue was delayed along the way, and we were okay with that. Over those twenty months, we, including our authors, navigated health challenges, loss, and life's demands with grace and compassion. In a culture driven by urgency and deadlines, we chose presence, care, and the belief that transformative work takes time.

Upon sharing our Call for Proposals, I admit that I expected sharp critiques to pour in—analyses that would challenge holistic education for its lack of inclusivity, its barriers to marginalized communities, and its frequent alignment with privilege. I was ready to hear it and grapple with the hard questions. I was ready to appropriately disrupt and disturb the field, and to initiate the difficult but necessary conversations.

I was wrong. Beautifully wrong.

“All of us in the academy and in the culture as a whole are called to renew our minds if we are to transform educational institutions –and society– so that the way we live, teach, and work can reflect our joy in cultural diversity, our passion for justice, and our love of freedom.” - bell hooks (1994)

Rather than a critique of what holistic education lacks, we received story after story of what it *already is*—and has long been—in communities whose voices have historically been overlooked. Authors shared stories of finding wholeness and wellbeing through practices handed down by their grandmothers, of creating healing educational spaces in the absence of institutional support, of

developing curriculum that affirmed students' full identities when the materials provided failed to do so. We read pieces describing Indigenous pedagogies weaving together mind, body, spirit, land, and community, making contemporary definitions of “whole child” education seem narrow by comparison. We met Black professors who described how they have long nurtured their full humanity and that of their students not as an enhancement to learning but as a strategy for survival and resistance.

It was evident that—outside our dominant discourse and despite systems designed to fragment, oppress, and diminish—metamorphic holistic education with a social justice outcome was alive. And the vocabulary, frameworks, and approaches were far from new (think, “otherfathering,” “femtorship,” “ephemerality,” and “communiversity”); they simply hadn't been brought to the table. Holistic education isn't monolithic. It both influences and transforms the communities in which it is practiced *and* it is transformed by them. These stories were evidence of that. We hadn't only broadened the circle of holistic education, we had finally made the circle wide enough to see what has always been there. These practices and methodologies weren't waiting to be discovered or validated by our field—they needed to be *acknowledged, respected, and learned from*.

The difference between extraction and relationship—between seeking “diverse voices” to fit a predetermined narrative and creating space for entirely new narratives to emerge—was clear. And when I stopped searching for what I expected from our Call and started listening to what was being shared, everything changed.

This special themed issue marks a watershed moment for holistic education. The voices gathered here do not merely add diverse perspectives to the

existing framework of holistic education; they stretch, bend, and reshape the very framework itself. They reveal wisdom that has been present all along in communities that have long understood that holistic learning, healing, and liberation are inseparable, where they are not aspirations, but daily acts of survival, thriving, and joy. These pieces show us what becomes possible when a field moves beyond token inclusion toward true partnership; when the quiet, insidious violence of exclusion is named aloud; and when people of color and other marginalized groups are not just included, but, as Irby (2021) so powerfully writes, they are granted *influential presence*. These pieces also remind us that the work to expand holistic education—to explicitly address and grapple with racial inequities in particular—remains urgent and is ongoing.

“You write in order to change the world, ...and if you alter, even but a millimeter the way people look at reality, then you can change it.” - James Baldwin (as quoted in Romano, 1979)

This special themed issue of HER emerges at a particularly fraught moment in our nation’s history. We are living through a time of escalating conflict and deepening division, a cultural climate in which diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts are under direct attack. Book bans threaten intellectual freedom, and educators who name systemic inequities face real consequences. The irony is stark: just as social justice and holistic education are most needed—when our communities are calling for approaches that affirm the full humanity of every learner—these very practices are being explicitly marginalized and undermined.

In this hostile climate, the courage of our contributors shines. Many chose to share their stories and scholarship despite real risks, knowing that silence does not serve justice, and that their voices are vital to the conversations this moment

demands. Others, with equal integrity, chose to withdraw or to be anonymous, out of fear, concern for their safety, or worry for the institutions they serve. For them, we’ve included an article of blank pages: a quiet but powerful act of acknowledgment. It honors the wisdom and courage that remain present, even when their stories could not be.

As you engage with the articles, I invite you to adopt a posture of curiosity rather than expertise. Let the voices challenge your assumptions, open new ways of understanding, and illuminate blind spots. Let them unsettle and expand you. The authors in these pages have gifted their wisdom and vision. Let them teach you about holistic education. Not a method striving to become more socially just, but a liberatory tradition that has always honored the well-being and the full humanity of learners and educators alike.

Welcome to an expanded understanding of what holistic education has always been—and what it can become when we truly make wide spaces for all voices to lead. Welcome all.

References

- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- Irby, D. (2021). *Stuck improving: Racial equity and school leadership*. Harvard Education Press.
- Romano, J. (1979, September 23). *James Baldwin writing and talking*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/09/23/archives/james-baldwin-writing-and-talking-baldwin-baldwin-authors-query.html>

Ross, L (2025). "*Calling in*" skills when polarization threatens democracy [Conference session]. Compassion and Justice Leadership in Polarizing Times, Anima Leadership Conference, Virtual.

Author Bio

Debbie Chenet Millon spent nearly two decades as a Head of School at two independent, holistic/progressive schools. Her leadership is deeply rooted in the theories, writings, and mentorship of scholars who are considered to be among the pantheon of holistic education. Today, her work has expanded beyond a single school community, with an arc toward social justice. As an educational coach and consultant, and in her current role as Director of Operations at Educators Collaborative, she designs systems to support strategic transformation and partners with school leaders across the country. Debbie has also served in advisory roles in organizations focused on community engagement, educational equity, and justice across multiple levels of the educational landscape. Her work increasingly centers on guiding educators and leadership teams in critical reflection on equity, belonging, and privilege, with a particular focus on the imperative to de-center whiteness within progressive and holistic education.