

Social Justice and Equity in Holistic Education

Editorial

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Abstract

An introduction to the articles in the Spring 2025 “*Social Justice and Equity in Holistic Education*” issue of the *Holistic Education Review*, written by the guest editors.

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Introduction

“*Who am I?*” This question, and its correlates, “*Where do I come from?*” and “*Where do I go from here?*” formed the foundation of Maria Montessori’s elementary education curriculum (Duffy & Duffy, 2002). This archetypical example of holistic education strives not only to support learners in understanding themselves on the deepest levels, but locates each learner as fundamentally embedded in an existing group of others, in motion through time, coming from a particular history, and headed in a trajectory influenced by the choices each one makes (Florencio-Wain, 2024).

Every author in this special issue follows this tradition. Each is embedded in their communities, with insider knowledge about how best to support the growth of educators and learners in their environments. They not only forefront wisdom

within their communities and domains of knowledge that show us how to better make sense of the world we are living in, but they also demonstrate the interconnection of our thinking and feeling selves, and our interconnection with one another, with place, and with history. Together, they invite us to see ourselves as inextricably and profoundly connected to the world and one another. This knowledge undergirds our understanding of ourselves as empowered agents of change.

As you move through these articles, we encourage you to attend to not only the concepts presented and conveyed to the students and members of each learning community, but also to the ways that these holistic educators describe environments that support well-being and development on multiple levels. Most authors begin by identifying and naming the systemic injustices; entrenched biases and miseducation rooted in unexamined settler

colonial perspectives; the undermining and erasure of diverse and indigenous cultures; the attitudes of entitlement and unwillingness to be uncomfortable performed by power holders in the dominant culture. Several go further to suggest holistic/social justice-oriented frameworks and proscriptions to address these problems. Above all, we highlight the many courageous authors who provide detailed descriptions of the programs and interventions they have designed and implemented that are status quo-disrupting, culturally affirming, nurturing, and celebratory.

The call to contribute to this special issue invited authors to consider their work in relationship to each of the aspects of well-being described in the Theory of Holistic Wellbeing (ToHW) (Florencio-Wain, 2024), which identifies seven domains of well-being—remembered through the acronym Wi THRIVE: *Wisdom, transpersonal, heart, root, individual, voice, enactment*. These domains are interconnected and interdependent. ToHW contends that holistic well-being is manifest where each one of these domains is supported and integrated. The contributions collected here are remarkable renderings of holistic well-being support in the service of social justice and belonging. General themes that emerged are:

Expanding the Field

The field of holistic education has increasingly expanded beyond conventional pedagogical concerns to encompass the full spectrum of human development—mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual. This body of work reflects a broadening understanding of education not merely as a site for academic instruction but as a space for healing, liberation, and cultural affirmation, particularly for communities historically marginalized by dominant systems. Across diverse settings—including higher education, K-12 schools, medical education, and community

spaces—these studies demonstrate that holistic education can foster both individual and collective well-being, cultivate resistance to systemic oppression, and create conditions for human flourishing. Central to this evolving landscape is the recognition that equitable education must integrate culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and community-grounded practices.

Holistic Education as Healing and Resistance

A clear, recurring theme across these articles is the framing of holistic education as a pathway to both healing and resistance, especially for communities affected by systemic oppression. Whether through Elizabeth Wesley's personal narrative of rest as liberation (Wesley, 2025), the Indigenous Corn Pollen Model promoting community well-being (Secatero & Marsh, 2025), the reciprocal nature of teaching and learning leading to healing when we embrace our vulnerability (Anonymous, 2025), or the integration of Black feminist healing traditions into pedagogy (botts-ward, 2025; Duff, 2025), these works emphasize that education must address the psychological, spiritual, and emotional harm inflicted by societal injustices. This theme also extends to practices like qigong for health recovery (Whitaker, 2025), the reimagining of medical education to center community healing (botts-ward, 2025), and supporting mental health challenges in religious spaces (Salam, 2025). Collectively, these contributions reveal that healing is inseparable from learning for marginalized groups and that education itself can be a form of resistance to structural violence.

Centering Marginalized Voices and Epistemologies

Another foundational theme is the elevation of marginalized voices, knowledges, and cultural traditions within educational spaces. Across these works, Black women educators (Gibson-Winston, 2025; Beck & Williams, 2025; Duff, 2025),

Indigenous communities (Secatero & Marsh, 2025), and diasporic Black street artists (Ali, 2025) are foregrounded as knowledge holders, cultural stewards, and change agents. This epistemological re-centering challenges Eurocentric, exclusionary traditions in education, inviting a richer, more inclusive intellectual landscape. For example, poetic duo-ethnography (Beck & Williams, 2025), community-based activism (Ali, 2025), and other alternative forms of scholarly inquiry and cultural expression resist erasure and cultivate belonging. Together, these studies highlight the imperative for educational institutions to embrace diverse cultural narratives and ways of knowing.

Holistic Education as a Tool for Structural Transformation

Beyond individual healing, these studies position holistic education as instrumental in advancing broader structural change. Authors explore how holistic frameworks intersect with racial justice efforts, such as affinity groups for educators of color (Pour-Khorshid et al., 2025), community-responsive schooling in settler colonial contexts (Noguera, 2025), and curricular reform to promote equity (Gallion & Obregón, 2025). Integrating a holistic lens into special education (Hilliard, 2025) reveals new possibilities for more just and inclusive practices. Even in the face of political backlash and resistance (Navarro, 2025), educators are developing bold strategies to embed social justice and liberation into their teaching. These efforts illustrate how holistic education can operate as a vehicle for transforming educational institutions themselves—shifting them from spaces of harm to spaces that nurture agency, well-being, and systemic equity.

Methodological Insights: Participatory and Culturally Grounded Research

Methodologically, these studies collectively endorse participatory, community-based, and culturally grounded approaches to research and educational design. Whether through ethnography (Pour-Khorshid et al., 2025; Noguera, 2025), autoethnographic epistolary (Campbell et al., 2025), poetic narrative (Beck & Williams, 2025), experiential learning (Richardson, 2025) or experiential case study (Ali, 2025), the research prioritizes lived experience, reflexivity, and accountability to community. This methodological shift away from dominant quantitative paradigms (Campbell et al., 2025) and toward intersectional, critical, and narrative pedagogy (Tapscott, 2025) reflects a growing recognition that understanding and addressing the complex needs of marginalized learners requires methods rooted in relationality, accountability, and cultural relevance. Such approaches not only generate more meaningful knowledge but also align with the very goals of holistic education: empowerment, healing, and liberation.

The Necessity of Expanding Holistic Education

Despite the progress and promising developments, these works collectively reveal that the field of holistic education has yet to fully grapple with the centrality of racial justice, particularly anti-Black racism, in defining and achieving social equity. Black educators and students (Wesley, 2025; Pour-Khorshid et al., 2025; Navarro, 2025; Gibson-Winston, 2025; Beck & Williams, 2025; Ali, 2025; Duff, 2025) face compounded burdens that holistic education must explicitly address. The omission or minimization of racial inequality risks reproducing the very harms holistic education seeks to heal. Expanding the definition of social justice within holistic education to center racial equality—including addressing anti-Blackness, settler colonialism, and systemic oppression—is essential for realizing its transformative potential. Doing so requires both individual-level healing and

structural change, as these studies powerfully illustrate.

Conclusion

While the dominant themes coalesce around healing, resistance, and structural transformation, several contributions surface unique but complementary insights. For instance, the role of religious spaces in supporting mental health (Salam, 2025) expands the scope of holistic education beyond formal educational institutions. The prioritization of educators' own well-being (Wesley, 2025; Gibson-Winston, 2025; Anonymous, 2025) reflects a growing acknowledgment that teacher sustainability is integral to student success. Finally, the integration of arts, embodied practices, and community traditions (Beck & Williams, 2025; Ali, 2025; Whitaker, 2025) underscores the multifaceted, culturally embedded nature of holistic educational work.

Collectively, these works offer a rich, nuanced portrait of a field in evolution—one that positions holistic education as an essential, justice-oriented practice rooted in community, healing, and empowerment. They reveal promising models for integrating culturally-relevant, trauma-informed, and equity-centered approaches into educational spaces. However, they also expose critical gaps, particularly the need to center racial justice explicitly within holistic education frameworks. Moving forward, scholars, practitioners, and institutions must embrace an expanded, anti-racist vision of holistic education—one that dismantles structural inequities while cultivating environments where all learners, especially those from marginalized communities, can and do thrive!

References

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Author Bios

Fatima Brunson, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Education Department at Spelman College, where she is committed to advancing equity and justice in education. Dr. Brunson earned her doctorate in Policy Studies in Urban Education from the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). Her research centers on the critical role that schools play in cultivating teachers' cultural knowledge and deepening their commitments to responsive, equity-centered teaching practices—essential pillars of culturally responsive pedagogy. Through case study research in urban schools, Dr. Brunson investigates the complex dynamics that emerge when there is a demographic divide between students and educators. Her work sheds light on the factors that most significantly shape teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and practices, with the goal of equipping educators to better serve all students, particularly students of color. Beyond her academic research, Dr. Brunson collaborates with school districts and informal learning spaces—including science

centers and children's museums—to explore how educators across settings can work together to ensure that students experience humanizing, culturally sustaining learning environments. Through her consultation services, she offers both virtual and in-person training for organizations, providing critical support in cultivating inclusive workplace cultures and enhancing student engagement through culturally sustaining innovations. Driven by an unwavering belief in education as a tool for liberation, Dr. Brunson's work is rooted in the urgent need to advance educational equity across both formal and informal learning spaces. Her research, partnerships, and advocacy reflect a deep, enduring commitment to ensuring that all children—especially those from historically marginalized communities—receive the affirming, high-quality education they deserve.

María Heysha Carrillo Carrasquillo, M. Ed., is a doctoral candidate in the Teacher Education and Learning Sciences program at North Carolina State University. Her research interests include critical pedagogies in community spaces, multilingual education, and teacher preparation. Heysha brings a breadth of practical teaching experience to her academic work, having spent nine years as a Certified Teacher in diverse North Carolina and Puerto Rico settings. Her experience spans preschool to middle school grades across rural, suburban, and independent schools. Heysha's academic journey is driven by a deep commitment to fostering inclusive and empowering educational environments. Heysha is a graduate researcher at the Literacy and Community Initiative. In this role, she works closely with historically marginalized youth, assisting them in amplifying their voices by providing tools and strategies for them to write and publish their counternarratives. Heysha strives to impact education and contribute to social justice through her research, teaching, and community engagement.

AutumnJoy Felicidade Florencio-Wain, PhD teaches in the department of Educational Studies and Leadership at the State University of New York at New Paltz. Dr. Florencio-Wain earned her doctorate in Educational Theory and Practice from the State

University of New York at Albany. Her doctoral research in the most prominent forms of K-12 holistic pedagogies (including Montessori, Waldorf, Democratic Free schooling, and homeschooling) investigates the intentions, methods, and lifelong impacts of holistic education. Her current research, ethnographic shadowing of adult former students of holistic education, triangulates the previously collected data.

Additionally, Dr. Florencio-Wain offers online and in-person consultation and coaching using the HoW Wi THRIVE analytic framework to support caregivers, educators, and organizations in providing holistic wellbeing support. Dr. Florencio-Wain's work is founded in the conviction that holistic wellbeing support belongs in all human environments, and that the fundamental outcome of wellbeing is active engagement in creative expression, ecologic attunement, social justice, and the joyful upliftment of all.

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.

Dr. Meredith Shockley-Smith is the Executive Director of Cradle Cincinnati, Dr. Shockley-Smith is committed to building on the substantial reductions in infant mortality with a sustained focus on health equity

and the elimination of the racial disparities of birth outcomes that still plague our community. In addition, she is a Field Professor at the University of Cincinnati Medical School in the Department of Pediatrics. Prior to these roles she served as Director of Equity and Community Strategies for Cradle Cincinnati. During her tenure in this role she founded Queens Village, a community of Black women who work towards self-healing and sustainable systems change in the medical space.

Dr. Jvania Michelle Webb is an independent interdisciplinary scholar whose research draws from Black feminism, Black queer critique, and intersectionality. She holds a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies with emphasis in Social Justice and Women and Gender Studies from the University of Missouri–St. Louis. Her current work includes a landscape analysis of Black queer organizations across the Midwest, aimed at shifting perceptions to affirm the wholeness, worth, and humanity of LGBTQ+ youth and adults.

Dr. Webb recently served as a postdoctoral scholar at the University of California, Riverside, where she managed a \$1 million dollar research project exploring how relationships—familial, peer, and chosen—shape the lives of LGBTQ+ youth transitioning into adulthood in Southern California. Merging scholarship and community praxis, she also serves as the founder of *You Are Worthy, Inc.*, a nonprofit dedicated to mentoring and leadership development for Black queer and foster youth.