

Interweaving Holistic Education, Peace Practices, and Restorative Approaches: A Loom for Healing Harm and Re-humanizing

Scott Boldt

E-mail: greenowl@bigpicturelearning.org

Received September 2025

Accepted for publication October 2025

Published May 2026

Abstract

This article argues that weaving holistic education, peace practices, and restorative approaches transforms how learning communities address harm. Anchored in an interdependent transformational leadership framework centred on relationships, practice, compassion, and shared interest, the approach shifts schools from fragmented initiatives to living systems where dignity, accountability, and restoration become routine. Learning becomes relational by design, conflict is reframed as an opportunity for growth, and cultural change is sustained through participatory practice. Interweaving these approaches embeds relational infrastructure into everyday life through collaborative problem-solving, shared protocols, and conflict transformation practices attentive to history, identity, and systemic conditions. Restorative and peace practices further deepen trauma-aware holistic education by strengthening safety, trust, collaboration, and empowerment while moving schools beyond behaviour management toward communal healing and structural change.

The article also addresses contemporary mental-health challenges and the “epidemic of loneliness” (Murthy, 2023) by embedding belonging, emotional literacy, co-regulation, and meaningful contribution into daily routines and community life. Methodologically, it outlines practical structures for implementation, including connection and repair circles, participatory protocols, and recurring cycles of reconciliation grounded in story, recognition, responsibility, and renewal. The implications are threefold: leaders gain a coherent and sustainable framework, staff and students develop conflict literacy and agency, and systems confronting inequity connect reconciliation with structural transformation. By moving from parallel initiatives to interwoven practice, learning communities can become places where harm is addressed without humiliation, responsibility is taken without despair, and dignity can emerge and endure.

Keywords: *holistic education, leadership, peace, reconciliation, conflict transformation*

Across many schools and youth settings, there is no shortage of well-intentioned initiatives: trauma-informed training, restorative circles, mindfulness programs, and well-being campaigns. Yet these often exist as parallel efforts—valuable, but fragmented—and their impact can feel uneven, dependent on individuals rather than sustained by the culture of the community.

This article argues that a different pattern emerges when holistic education, peace practices, and restorative approaches are not implemented as separate initiatives, but are intentionally interwoven. When this occurs, they begin to function as a coherent relational system—one that strengthens belonging, supports the repair of harm, and re-humanizes learning environments.

The purpose of this article is to offer a conceptually grounded and practice-informed account of what such integration makes possible as evidenced in the principles and practices of Big Picture Learning schools. Drawing on scholarship in holistic education (Dewey, 1899), belonging (Allen et al., 2021), trauma-informed practice (Gherardi, 2022), and conflict transformation (Lederach, 2003), the article explores how these traditions have been and can be brought into meaningful alignment.

Instead of proposing a new program, this paper contributes a way of thinking and practicing differently—one that situates relationships, repair, and shared responsibility at the centre of learning, in the form of Big Picture Learning. At the same time, it acknowledges its scope as a conceptual and practice-informed synthesis rather than an empirical study, and invites further research to test and refine the claims presented here.

Re-centering Holistic Education in Relational Practice

Holistic education has long emphasized the development of the whole person—intellectual,

emotional, social, and ethical (Dewey, 1899; Allen et al., 2021). Dewey (1899) and later in the 1930s (Vygotsky, 1986) argued that education is fundamentally social and grounded in lived experience and interaction. More recently, research on belonging has reinforced this view, demonstrating that students' sense of connection to others is a key predictor of engagement, well-being, and achievement (Allen et al., 2021).

While the philosophical foundations of holistic education are well established, there remains a persistent gap between intention and enactment, particularly in complex and high-pressure school environments (MacLochlainn et al., 2022). Schools espouse values of care, inclusion, and whole-person development, yet struggle to operationalize these in everyday practice—particularly in moments of conflict, disconnection, or harm.

It is here that peace practices and restorative approaches offer not an alternative, but a deepening of holistic education. They provide structures through which relationships can be sustained, conflict can be engaged constructively, and communities can respond to harm in ways that preserve dignity. These structures are built into the design and they form the practices of Big Picture Learning schools. As will be seen, when these approaches are brought together intentionally, several shifts begin to occur. These are not discrete outcomes but mutually reinforcing dynamics that reshape how learning communities function.

Interweaving Practices: Big Picture Learning

Big Picture Learning (BPL) is an international school design and transformation organization that originated over three decades ago at the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center—an innovative public high school that

continues to serve as a flagship site for the network. Since its founding, BPL has expanded significantly and now supports more than 150 schools across the United States and over 100 additional schools in 12 countries worldwide. This growth reflects a sustained commitment to designing schooling through relational, interest-driven, and real-world learning structures.

Central to the BPL approach are Personal Learning Plans (PLPs), which are co-designed by students and educators. These plans align with required curricular standards while enabling learners to pursue their interests, strengths, and emerging aspirations through individualized pathways. A defining feature of this approach is the integration of out-of-school internships, where students engage with mentors in professional and community settings. This design situates learning within authentic contexts, strengthening relevance and motivation while extending the boundaries of the classroom (Levine, 2002; Littky, 2004).

Equally foundational are advisories, which function as small, stable learning communities anchored by a dedicated advisor. Advisors work with the same group of students over multiple years, supporting not only academic progress but also personal development and well-being. This continuity fosters trust, accountability, and a strong sense of belonging—conditions widely recognized as essential for meaningful learning.

Empirical research on BPL provides evidence of the impact of this model. Longitudinal studies indicate high graduation rates (92%), alongside increased student confidence and stronger relationships between students and adults, particularly among historically underserved populations. Importantly, these relational benefits extend beyond the advisor–student dynamic: 90% of students reported having multiple supportive relationships with adults, and 87% reported similar connections with peers (Arnold & Mihut,

2020). Such findings suggest that the BPL design not only makes learning personal and relevant but also cultivates a broader ecology of support within the school community.

Relationships as the Ground of Learning

In an interwoven school design, relationships are not peripheral to learning; they are its foundation. This aligns with self-determination theory, which emphasizes the importance of relatedness in motivation and engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2000). It is also supported by empirical research showing that social-emotional learning initiatives improve both academic and social outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011).

In practice, this often takes the form of consistent relational routines—circles, advisories, or structured check-ins—where students and educators come to know one another beyond roles, reinforcing belonging and engagement (Allen et al., 2021; Durlak et al., 2011). These are not add-ons, but design features that shape the learning environment.

In BPL schools, advisory is the core of a student’s academic and social experience. Every student belongs to a small advisory group, typically 15-20 students, led by a dedicated advisor who stays with them for multiple years. This continuity ensures that each young person and their family are truly known, challenged, and supported as both a learner and a person.

Advisory is a powerful, proven design feature for creating schools where relationships drive achievement, belonging fuels engagement, and learning connects to students’ real lives. Advisory is most frequently described by students as ‘family’.

From Policy to Shared Practice

Educational institutions often rely on policies to manage behaviour and respond to harm. While necessary, policies alone rarely transform culture. Research on whole-school approaches suggests that sustained change emerges through shared practice and collective learning (MacLochlainn et al., 2022).

Consultancy Protocols (Dunne and Thompson-Grove, n.d.; McDonald et al., 2013) and Restorative Practices (Durlak et al., 2011; Wachtel, 2016) invite educators and students to engage with real dilemmas from their own contexts, reflecting research on collaborative professional learning and inquiry-based improvement (MacLochlainn et al., 2022). This shifts the focus from abstract solutions to situated inquiry, where participants listen, question assumptions, and co-construct responses. Over time, communities develop a shared language and increased confidence in addressing complexity.

Conflict as an Opportunity for Learning

Conflict is often treated as disruption—something to be minimized or controlled. Peace practice, particularly as articulated in conflict transformation theory, offers a different orientation. Lederach (2003) suggests that conflict can reveal underlying patterns of relationship, power, and identity that might otherwise remain unexamined.

When approached in this way, conflict becomes part of the curriculum, aligning with conflict transformation principles that emphasize learning through relational engagement (Lederach, 2003). Restorative processes create structured spaces where harm can be named, impact can be understood, and repair can be co-constructed. Empirical studies indicate that such approaches

can improve teacher–student relationships and reduce disciplinary disparities (Gregory et al., 2016).

A BPL national director gave permission to share a segment of one of her recent experiences (March 27, 2026) with a new BPL school. This was written about a student who had caused harm and indicates how a conflict is addressed in a BPL advisory.

He did something that scared a bunch of kids on Wednesday and really crossed the line of what could be handled through discussion and mediation. ... Here's the beauty in the story. This student's advisory has been in community with this student all year. They are often in the path of his behaviors, melt downs, bad days, and physicality. When they discussed what had happened earlier this week, including to a few of them, they spoke with compassion and asked what this student needed to come back. Then they said they WANTED him to come back, not because he is popular. Not because he is holding something over him. They wanted him to come back because they had seen his good qualities, saw he was trying, and had seen him change for the better over the first three quarters of the school year. Most kids in this class would NEVER be in a class with this student in a different school. He would be shuffled into increasingly more restrictive classes and environments until, honestly, he was pushed out of school altogether. Is it likely these kids would have a more peaceful experience at school if he wasn't there? Probably. Are they appreciating the "break?" Probably. Do they see the school responding? Definitely. Do they see him as part of their advisory? They do. Are they learning right alongside this student about

how to BE in community with all kinds of others? They are.

Culture as Ongoing Work

Culture is not established through a single initiative; it is shaped through repeated interactions, rituals, and responses to challenge. Reconciliation scholarship emphasizes that repair is not a one-time event but an ongoing process involving truth-telling, accountability, and renewal (Volf, 1996).

In interwoven environments, practices of repair become expected rather than exceptional, reflecting restorative justice findings on consistency and relational accountability (Gregory et al., 2016). Students and staff come to understand that harm will be addressed with seriousness and care. Over time, this consistency builds trust—not because conflict disappears, but because it is engaged with integrity. Healthy learning cultures are developed and maintained through regular and consistent practices that not only support learning but also model appropriate ways to address conflict and foster positive relationships.

Deepening Trauma-Informed and Holistic Practice

Trauma-informed education highlights the importance of safety, trust, and empowerment (Gherardi, 2022); however, these principles can remain abstract unless supported by relational and restorative structures. An interwoven approach makes safety experiential rather than procedural, a key principle that Gherardi highlights in trauma-informed education. Predictable routines—greetings, circles, and collaborative inquiry—help create environments where people feel seen and supported. Trust is cultivated

through repeated experiences of being heard and respected. The structure and regularity of advisory in BPL schools builds a community of trust where challenges can be dealt with safely.

Importantly, this work also attends to the broader conditions that shape harm. Critical pedagogy reminds us that educational experiences are situated within social and systemic contexts (Freire, 2000). Addressing conflict, therefore, involves not only interpersonal repair but also attention to patterns of exclusion or inequity.

Responding to Loneliness and Disconnection

The increasing prevalence of loneliness among young people has been identified as a significant public health concern (Murthy, 2023). Schools are uniquely positioned to respond, not through isolated interventions, but through the intentional design of connection.

Structures such as advisory groups, peer mentoring, collaborative learning, and community-connected projects create regular opportunities for meaningful interaction, which are associated with increased belonging and reduced isolation (Allen et al., 2021; Murthy, 2023). Embodied practices—movement, arts, and outdoor learning—further support emotional and relational well-being.

What distinguishes an interwoven approach is that these are not separate programs, but part of a coherent ecology of belonging. Students experience connection not occasionally, but as a consistent feature of their daily lives.

Ethical Considerations

Interweaving relational practices intensifies contact among members of a community. While this creates opportunities for healing, it also requires careful attention to ethics. Participation

must remain voluntary, particularly in restorative processes, consistent with trauma-informed and restorative ethics (Gherardi, 2022; Gregory et al., 2016). Individuals need agency over how and when they engage. Trauma-informed practice requires pacing, choice, and appropriate support structures.

Equally important is the balance between accountability and care. Restorative approaches are not about avoiding consequences, but about ensuring that responses to harm are relationally and contextually meaningful. In BPL schools, because advisors see students every day, they manage human and social service concerns of the student and family. This avoids wrap around services that can often leave students and families reliant on outside professionals which can make them dependent as opposed to taking responsibility and benefitting from the strength of community connections and caring relationships.

Evidence and Ongoing Inquiry

Assessing the impact of interwoven practices requires both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Indicators such as attendance, participation, and incident patterns provide one lens, as commonly used in evaluating whole-school and SEL interventions (Durlak et al., 2011; MacLochlainn et al., 2022). Equally important, if not more so, are narrative accounts—stories of repair, moments of courage, and shifts in belonging. This aligns with a view of schools as learning communities, where evaluation is not merely about measurement but about collective reflection and adaptation.

Conclusion

The metaphor of weaving is useful insofar as it points to connection, strength, and

interdependence, but the value of this work lies not in metaphor, but in how integration is enacted in practice.

This article has argued that when holistic education, peace practices, and restorative approaches are intentionally aligned, learning communities can shift in meaningful ways, consistent with research across belonging, SEL, and restorative practice literature (Allen et al., 2021; Durlak et al., 2011; Gregory et al., 2016): relationships become a stable foundation for learning; conflict is engaged as a site of growth; and systems for repair support both individual dignity and collective accountability.

The contribution offered here is not a new model, but a clearer articulation of how existing practices and initiatives can be brought into coherence through school design, as evidenced in the experience of BPL schools. In this sense, the work is both practical and aspirational—grounded in research and experience, yet open to further development. There are, however, limitations to this account. The examples provided are illustrative, and the effectiveness of interwoven approaches will vary across contexts.

Future research could examine longitudinal impacts, comparative implementations, and the conditions under which integration is most sustainable.

Even so, the implications are significant. At a time when many learning communities face fragmentation, disconnection, and unresolved harm, a more coherent and relationally grounded approach offers a way forward. It suggests that the work of education is not only to transmit knowledge, but to cultivate the conditions in which people can live, learn, and repair together.

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Author Bio

Professor **Scott Boldt** resides in Ireland with his family and writes extensively on the initiatives, principles, and practices of Big Picture Learning. A graduate of Trinity College, Dublin and the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, for ten years, he led the Reconciliation and Integration Program at Edgehill College, Queen's University Belfast working closely with practitioners on conflict transformation and connecting people who would not otherwise ordinarily meet around shared interests and needs. His most recent book (co-authored with Elliot Washor) is *Learning to Leave: How Real-World Learning Transforms Education*. Born and bred in Chicago, his passions include playing ice hockey, travelling, and continuing his lifelong friendships with a suitable libation.