

Whole Teaching, Whole Schools, Whole Teachers

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Educators must reclaim and reshape the vision of human wholeness held by our ancestors and endorsed by many spiritual traditions.

To teach the whole child, we need whole teaching, whole schools, and whole teachers. Mahatma Gandhi offered a wonderful definition of holistic education:

I hold that true education of the intellect can only come through a proper exercise and training of the bodily organs, e.g., hands, feet, eyes, ears, nose, etc. In other words an intelligent use of the bodily organs in a child provides the best and quickest way of developing his intellect. But unless the development of the mind and body goes hand in hand with a corresponding awakening of the soul, the former alone would prove to be a poor lopsided affair. By spiritual training I mean education of the heart. A proper and all round development of the mind, therefore, can take place only when it proceeds *pari passu* with the education of the physical and spiritual faculties of the child. They constitute an indivisible whole. (Kripalani, 1980, p. 138)

Unfortunately, the departments and ministries of education in most countries have ignored the vision Gandhi articulated. Instead, they have followed a piecemeal approach to education policy and focused on the head, ignoring the hands and heart. In recent years, an obsession with test results has led to even more pervasive fragmentation.

How can schools return to more holistic teaching and learning? We need to focus on three elements: whole teaching, whole schools, and whole teachers.

Whole Teaching

Whole teaching focuses on a balance between the whole and the part. It challenges the common practice of breaking the curriculum into subjects, units, and lessons without an encompassing, inspiring vision. This fragmented approach is especially problematic in modern times, according to British anthropologist and social scientist Gregory Bateson:

Although we can persuade our children to learn a long list of facts about the world, they don't seem to have the capacity to put them together in a single unified understanding—there is no “pattern which connects.” For most human beings through history, the pattern which connected their individual lives to the complex regularity of the world in which they lived was a religion, an extended metaphor, which made it possible for ordinary people to think at levels of integrated complexity otherwise impossible. (Bateson & Bateson, 1987, p. 196)

Philosopher and spiritual practitioner Lex Hixon echoed Bateson's view that modern humans have lost the sense of balance between their individual activities and the big picture. He stated that we need to regain

the ancient way of thinking with the heart, in which the whole of creation appears sacred, [and] every event appears meaningful. (Golden, 1991, p. 27)

Whole teaching links the subject, unit, and lesson to a larger vision. This vision can vary, but it usually involves a sense of interdependence and personal wholeness. For example, Maria Montessori developed a curriculum for children ages 6–12 called *cosmic education*, in which children study the story of the universe and come to understand the place of human beings (and themselves) in this story (Duffy & Duffy, 2002).

Whole teaching also attempts to avoid fragmentation by making connections. It explores the relationship between linear thinking and intuition, the relationship between mind and body, the relationships among academic subjects, the relationship between individual and community, the relationship between human beings and the earth, and each person's relationship to his or her deeper sense of self, or soul. In such instructional approaches as theme-based learning and curriculum integration (Beane, 1997), students not only become aware of these relationships, but also develop the skills necessary to transform the relationships when appropriate (Miller, 1996/2007).

Whole teaching is inclusive in its teaching and learning strategies, meeting the needs of our increasingly diverse student population. To establish the rhythm, flow, and vitality that energize the classroom, whole teaching incorporates three instructional approaches:

- *Transmission teaching* involves the student receiving and accumulating knowledge and skills—for example, by reading a textbook or listening to a teacher's explanation. Transmission teaching is appropriate when we begin to learn a particular skill. For example, when we learn to drive a car, we study the basic rules of driving by reading the driving handbook in preparation for a written test.
- *Transactional teaching* involves the student in solving a cognitive problem or pursuing some form of inquiry—usually based on a set of procedures, which may be rooted in a particular discipline, such as physics or history.
- *Transformational teaching* connects the student and the curriculum more deeply—for example, through such strategies as cooperative learning, drama, and role playing.

Whole teaching uses all three of these approaches to reach the whole child. In my own teaching, for example, I often start class with meditation or visualization (transformation) followed by a short lecture (transmission). Students then discuss the ideas presented in the lecture or engage in some problem-solving activity in small groups (transaction). Individual teachers should find their own rhythm that fits their subject and inclinations.

Whole Schools

Organizationally, whole schools operate as sanctuaries:

not a collection of parts but an integrated system of souls—not so much a place but a state of mind in which they may flourish. (Secretan, 1996, p. 38)

In whole schools, teachers and students look forward to being there because they are nourished by the environment of respect, caring, and even reverence. Love, rather than fear, predominates. People feel validated as human beings and can speak authentically from their hearts. Most of all, they experience a deep sense of community. Although there is no universal recipe for developing a sanctuary, the following actions by school staff can promote this kind of environment (Miller, 2000):

- *Recognize the importance of the nonverbal*, and develop a balance between talk and silence. The quality of our presence—how we carry ourselves, how we engage others

through eye contact and the tone of our voice—has as much effect on student development as anything that we say. A warm smile directed to a student can send a message of support and love.

- *Pay attention to the aesthetic environment of the school and classroom.* We can help transform schools into sanctuaries by making the physical environment more beautiful. Make plants part of the school decor in the halls and in the classrooms; paint walls in soft, warm colors; place both student artwork and professional artwork on the walls.
- *Tell stories about the school.* Every school has a set of stories. Teachers and students can collect these stories by interviewing former students and community members, compile them in a booklet, and tell them on special occasions. By sharing stories over time, teachers and students see the continuity and uniqueness of their school. Recurring themes emerge that can help create a shared sense of meaning and wholeness.
- *Build in celebrations and rituals.* Rituals help give people a sense of connection to their communities. The most common ritual in schools is graduation, but there are many other occasions for celebrations and rituals. For example, schools may mark changes in the seasons with celebrations that include music, poetry, and stories. Some rituals—such as the morning classroom circle in which students share their thoughts and concerns—can be part of the daily life of the school.
- *Maintain truth and authenticity in relationships.* When we live in an environment in which people do not tell the truth, community breaks down and cynicism develops. For example, a principal might talk about the importance of collegial decision making but make all the important decisions on his or her own. On the other hand, when we work with someone trustworthy and authentic, we feel empowered.

Whole Teachers

Whole teaching and whole schools depend on whole teachers. Ralph Waldo Emerson, in talking to teachers, emphasized the importance of developing their own sense of wholeness:

By your own act you teach the beholder how to do the practicable. According to the depth from which you draw your life, such is the depth not only of your strenuous effort, but of your manners and presence. The beautiful nature of the world has here blended your happiness with your power. (Gilman, 1965, p. 437)

The important *presence* Emerson mentioned is rarely addressed in preservice and inservice teacher education. Instead, teacher preparation tends to emphasize instructional strategies or assessment techniques.

In my 20 years of graduate teaching, I have introduced meditation and mindfulness practice to more than 1,400 teachers, helping them slow down and become more centered in their work. For example, mindfulness practice involves learning to be wholly present to what is happening in the moment. In one mindfulness exercise, I ask students to first focus on some simple, everyday task, such as washing the dishes, and then bring this same focus and attention to their work with students in the classroom.

Teachers find these practices to be a powerful way to take care of themselves and develop presence, which leads to better student-teacher relationships as students

respond to the teacher's increased presence and interest. For example, Claire, who teaches middle-grades students with behavioral difficulties reports that meditation and mindfulness have helped her experience a deep sense of connectedness:

That place of gentleness, and presence, and mindfulness . . . connects you with yourself, but it also connects you to those around you. There's a sense of common soul. There's just a sense that we are all just one.

As a result,

I feel a patience with them and tenderness toward students. . . . The kid is being rude—driving me crazy. Instead, I see the kid is hurting and I care for him differently. I think I see the student as myself.

Reclaiming the Vision

We desperately need to move beyond the narrow vision of education that focuses solely on skills and knowledge to enable students to “compete in the global economy.” A different vision can be found in the world views of indigenous peoples, in the American transcendentalists, and in most spiritual traditions. By reclaiming the holistic vision that affirms our humanity and wholeness, we can provide our children with an education for the whole person.