

a brief introduction to holistic education

What is holistic education? What are the primary philosophies that distinguish it from traditional education? Who were the pioneers in holistic education? Ron Miller provides an introduction.

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*As the founder of the journal *Holistic Education Review* (now entitled *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice*), Miller is among the best known and best informed interpreters of the holistic education movement.*

holistic education

Throughout the 200-year history of public schooling, a widely scattered group of critics have pointed out that the education of young human beings should involve much more than simply molding them into future workers or citizens. The Swiss humanitarian [Johann Pestalozzi](#), the American [Transcendentalists](#), [Thoreau](#), [Emerson](#) and [Alcott](#), the founders of "progressive" education - [Francis Parker](#) and [John Dewey](#) -- and pioneers such as [Maria Montessori](#) and [Rudolf Steiner](#), among others, all insisted that education should be understood as the art of cultivating the moral, emotional, physical, psychological and spiritual dimensions of the developing child. During the 1970s, an emerging body of literature in science, philosophy and cultural history provided an overarching concept to describe this way of understanding education -- a perspective known as *holism*. A holistic way of thinking seeks to encompass and integrate multiple layers of meaning and experience rather than defining human possibilities narrowly. Every child is more than a future employee; every person's intelligence and abilities are far more complex than his or her scores on standardized tests.

Holistic education is based on the premise that each person finds identity, meaning, and purpose in life through connections to the community, to the natural world, and to spiritual values such as compassion and peace. Holistic education aims to call forth from people an intrinsic reverence for life and a passionate love of learning. This is done, not through an academic "curriculum" that condenses the world into instructional packages,

but through direct engagement with the environment. Holistic education nurtures a sense of wonder. **Montessori**, for example, spoke of "cosmic" education: Help the person feel part of the wholeness of the universe, and learning will naturally be enchanted and inviting. There is no one best way to accomplish this goal, there are many *paths of learning* and the holistic educator values them all; what is appropriate for some children and adults, in some situations, in some historical and social contexts, may not be best for others. The art of holistic education lies in its responsiveness to the diverse learning styles and needs of evolving human beings.

This attitude toward teaching and learning inspires many home-schooling families as well as educators in public and alternative schools. While few public schools are entirely committed to holistic principles, many teachers try hard to put many of these ideas into practice. By fostering collaboration rather than competition in classrooms, teachers help young people feel connected. By using real-life experiences, current events, the dramatic arts and other lively sources of knowledge in place of textbook information, teachers can kindle the love of learning. By encouraging reflection and questioning rather than passive memorization of "facts," teachers keep alive the "flame of intelligence" that is so much more than abstract problem-solving skill. By accommodating differences and refusing to label children, for example, as "learning disabled" or "hyperactive," teachers bring out the unique gifts contained within each child's spirit.

A parent or educator interested in learning more about holistic education can read the books and journals in this emerging field that have appeared since the 1980s, as well as classic writings by **Montessori**, **Steiner**, and **Krishnamurti**. It is also useful to become somewhat familiar with the more general holistic literature (for example work by Theodore Roszak, Fritjof Capra, Charlene Spretnak, Ken Wilber). The primary publication on holistic education is the journal **Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice**, published by Holistic Education Press (P.O. Box 328, Brandon, VT 05733; ph. (800) 639-4122) which also lists several books on the subject. The **Ontario Institute for Studies in Education** Press, in Toronto, has published work by **John P. Miller** that provides a good introduction to holistic education; **OISE** also hosts courses and conferences. There are separate bodies of literature on spirituality in education, eco-literacy, multiple intelligences, whole language, and cooperative learning that address more specific aspects of holistic education.

holistic education resources

Here is a partial listing from *30 Great Books In Education* (<http://www.great-ideas.org/30.htm>) recommended for developing a clearer understanding of the scope and depth of holistic education.

Bowers, C. A. (1993). *Education, Cultural Myths, and the Ecological Crisis Toward Deep Changes*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. Two main concerns underlie the essays of C.A. Bowers: One, that we are, as a species, in real danger of destroying our life-

sustaining ecosystems, and two, that the scope of this problem challenges the adequacy of the belief systems and ways of thinking of the “developed” world. Bowers takes on the most cherished assumptions of liberal humanism, modernism, and progressivism, with his critique of such taken-for-granted core beliefs as individualism, abstract rational thought, emancipation, progress, and the elaboration and extension of technology.

Cajete, Gregory (1994). *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education*. Kivaki Press. The purpose of education in tribal cultures is to connect people to their heritage and to their distinct place on earth. Cajete describes how this is achieved through “mythopoetic” rather than reductionistic teaching methods, including storytelling, sacred art, ritual, immersion in nature and simply through the daily involvement of young people in the life of the adult community. Education is not seen as a technical process to be managed by specialists but as a heroic journey, a challenging quest that each individual undertakes with the support and guidance of the community.

Clark, Edward, Jr. (1997). *Designing and Implementing an Integrated Curriculum: A Student-Centered Approach*. Brandon, VT: Psychology Press/Holistic Education Press. “Integrated curriculum” is more than the mere combination of subject areas, and more than another passing educational fad: By examining hidden assumptions about human potential, learning and intelligence, the nature of the universe, and the effectiveness of organizations, Clark demonstrates that the established educational structure is not equipped to cope with the major changes taking place in the world today. He calls for systemic restructuring.

Doll, William, Jr. (1993). *A Post-Modern Perspective on Curriculum*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press. Traces the origins of a conceptual revolution that is still very much in progress, a revolution that is moving curriculum theory from its “modernist” perspective (grounded in the mechanistic scientific worldview of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries) toward a “postmodern” paradigm characterized by ideas and metaphors from the new sciences of complexity, uncertainty, ambiguity, open systems, process, and transformations. Through his examination of the assumptions of contemporary educational policies and practices, Doll makes it clear that our educational ideas have not kept pace with other intellectual currents of the 20th century.

Edwards, Carolyn; Gandini, Lella and Forman, George (eds, 1993). *The Hundred Languages of Children The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation. This collection of 18 essays and interviews is the first comprehensive study (in English) of the internationally acclaimed infant and early childhood programs of Reggio Emilia, Italy. In this book, twenty-six American and Italian educators — including Howard Gardner, Lillian Katz, and the visionary founder of the Reggio Emilia schools, Loris Malaguzzi — reflect in depth on the origins, philosophy, teaching methods, and policy implications of these delightful learning centers.

Krishnamurti, J. (1953). *Education and the Significance of Life*. New York, NY: Harper &

Brothers Publisher. Krishnamurti (1895–1986) was a remarkable teacher, one of the few genuine sages of the twentieth century, and in *Education and the Significance of Life* he offers a perspective that is not only radical, but truly transformational. This is a penetrating critique of modern schooling based upon Krishnamurti's profound insight into the human mind and its conditioning by fear, prejudice, and ideology. Here, as in his numerous other lectures and writings, Krishnamurti explains that our reliance on dogmas, institutions, and authority figures prevents individuals from achieving the deep self-knowledge that leads to genuine wisdom. He argues that conventional forms of education "suffocate" the mind and heart by forcing young people to conform to adults' stale and incomplete understanding of the true meaning of life.

Marshak, David (1997). *The Common Vision: Parenting and Educating for Wholeness*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing. This highly original study compares three philosopher/mystics of the early twentieth century, from different cultures and religious traditions, who described remarkably similar visions of child development. Marshak looks closely at the work of Rudolf Steiner (founder of Waldorf education), Sufi teacher Inayat Khan, and Sri Aurobindo, "one of the greatest thinkers of modern India," showing how each emphasized the emergence of spiritual energies during successive stages of growth. In contrast to the dominant empiricist thinking of the modern age, each of these sages insisted that human development is essentially "an unfoldment of inherent potentials"; the individual is seen as "an organismic whole who contains within herself her own innate wisdom and motive force," though this spiritual voice requires careful guidance and cultivation by loving, alert adults.

Martin, Jane Roland (1992). *The Schoolhome Rethinking Schools for Changing Families*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. As Martin surveys the decline of traditional family patterns, the exodus of both men and women from home to the world of work, the abandonment of children to the influence of television and the streets, and the epidemic of violence that touches the lives of millions of young people today, she reflects that it is time to recreate within schools the caring, nurturing, socializing functions historically performed at home. Martin emphasizes the crucial importance of domestic life in the social and moral development of human personality; she argues that what is learned at home in early life is far more "basic" than any academic learning, and charges that American culture has consistently repressed the domestic sphere in favor of the public world of politics and economic production. For a variety of cultural and societal reasons, most homes today cannot provide the care that healthy development requires, and Martin believes that one essential antidote to rising violence and social disintegration is to provide the "moral equivalent of home" in schools.

Miller, John (1996). *The Holistic Curriculum*. Toronto, Canada: OISE Press. Holistic education, as John P. Miller defines it in this seminal work, is essentially concerned with connections in human experience — connections between mind and body, between linear thinking and intuitive ways of knowing, between academic disciplines, between individual

and community, and between the personal self and the transpersonal Self that all spiritual traditions believe to exist beyond the personal ego. The Holistic Curriculum concisely describes how holistic thinking integrates spiritual and scientific perspectives, drawing upon romantic, humanistic, and other radical alternatives to the atomistic worldview of the modern age.

Miller, Ron (1997). *What Are Schools For? Holistic Education in American Culture, 3rd Edition*. Brandon, VT: Holistic Education Press. Provides a concise account of the historical origins of American public schooling. Using a broad American Studies perspective that draws on research in social and intellectual history as well as a critical interpretation of educational theory, Miller identifies key cultural themes that have influenced the purpose, structure, and methods of modern educational institutions. He explains, for example, how the modern worldview associated with capitalism and scientific reductionism underlies conventional assumptions about schools, teaching, and learning. Miller then demonstrates that holistic education, grounded in a fundamentally different worldview, reflects very different assumptions about education and schooling.

Orr, David (1992). *Ecological Literacy Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. Examines the tremendous historical shift from modern industrial culture to a global postindustrial culture, and the revolutionary implications this shift will have for our understanding of education. The modern age has been characterized by an obsession with technology, economic growth, and domination over nature, together with a persistent economic and military competition between nations. But the global ecological crisis is forcing us to question these primary cultural realities, and our task now is to begin to understand and adopt the concept of an ecologically sustainable culture.

Palmer, Parker (1993). *To Know As We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*. San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco. This is a classic essay by one of the outstanding educational thinkers of our time. Parker Palmer was a student of Robert Bellah (*Habits of the Heart*) and shares Bellah's deep concern for modern society's loss of community and shared, sustaining values. He is also a spiritual seeker who was affiliated for several years with the Quaker retreat center Pendle Hill. *To Know as We are Known* expresses these concerns in lyrical, heartfelt prose. Palmer examines the modern tendency to objectify knowledge in order to "divide and conquer creation" and demonstrates that this is a fundamentally alienating and violent way to conceive the world. He proposes, instead, that true knowledge involves a mutual relationship between person and world — a relationship which calls upon us as individuals, and as a culture, to approach our experience with humility, reverence, imagination, and feeling. Holistic knowing is deep self-knowledge that engages the person morally and spiritually with the life around oneself.

Please refer to <http://www.great-ideas.org/30.htm> for complete annotations of these and other great background resources on holistic education and related topics.

links to holistic organizations and schools

Organizations Supporting Various Aspects of Holistic Education:

[AERO: Alternative Education Resource Organization](#)

[AllPIE: Alliance for Parental Involvement in Education](#)

[Association of Waldorf Schools of North America](#)

[Down to Earth Books](#)

[Education in Search of Spirit](#)

[EnCompass: Center for Natural Learning Rhythms](#)

[Folk Education Association of America \(FEAA\)](#)

[Great Ideas in Education](#)

[Home Education Magazine](#)

[John Dewey Project on Progressive Education](#)

[Montessori Foundation](#)

[National Association for Core Curriculum \(NACC; Kent, OH\)](#)

[National Coalition of Alternative Community Schools \(NCACS\)](#)

[National Coalition of Education Activists \(NCEA; Rhinebeck, NY\)](#)

[Paths of Learning](#)

[Rethinking Schools](#)

Schools Demonstrating Elements of Holistic Education:

[The Community School \(Camden, Maine, USA\)](#)

[Liberty School \(Blue Hill, Maine, USA\)](#)

[Play Mountain Place \(Los Angeles, California, USA\)](#)

[Puget Sound Community School \(Seattle, Washington, USA\)](#)

[Venice Hill School \(Vasalia, California, USA\)](#)

[The Windsor House \(North Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada\)](#)

This review was developed by the Paths of Learning Resource Center, at www.PathsOfLearning.net - designed to serve your holistic and learner-centered education resource and information needs.

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