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Holistic Education: How and Why

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by

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Abstract

Since standardized testing began in the early 2000s, teachers and administrators began to focus on grades and numbers due to pressure placed by these measures. Students are not numbers and therefore are not getting a holistic education that develops their whole being, only their academics. How do we incorporate methods into the classroom to develop the whole child, not just academics, and why is this important?

The most common way in the present day is through socio-emotional learning platforms or curriculums. These may be stand alone lessons or techniques on incorporation into lessons and school culture in general. Normally, whole schools or districts use the same curriculum for socio-emotional learning. As for smaller ways into personal curriculum, core subject lessons can be taught through project or problem-based learning. These two are different, but the same at heart. Both create a central concept or questions for the students to solve, connecting them to their community and the world. The difference is in product, project-based learning follows through on their solution and problem simply finds the solution, therefore making problem-based learning a shorter process. At the center of both ideas is connection. Students will develop their whole being if they feel connected to their different personal communities and it is modeled for them.

There are also daily ways to develop students as whole people such as community circle or a feelings circle. Understanding what the students are going through will allow the teacher to adjust teaching but also create trust between the teacher and the student as well as the student with their class. In turn, teachers should also be modeling this for their students, subtly sharing personal life happenings or being open about their feelings that day. Including students in the

creation of classroom rules and assignments also takes the teacher down from their invisible pedestal, creating that trust and wanting to participate in their learning.

Backed by Maslow's hierarchy, students cannot develop their academic sides, levels 4 and 5, without fulfilling the lower levels, levels of their personal development. Personal development in schools has been pushed to the side due to the rise of testing. To heed greater academic success, teachers must nurture all sides of the student, personal and academic. There will be some backlash from the administration/community, but if it is incorporated into the core curriculum, what is the harm? These 5 minutes of connection could save the class from 10 or more minutes of distraction from outbursts or conduct issues. It may take away from some of the teachers' personal time, as the connections happen before and after class, but maintaining work-life balance will save this from happening. At the heart of all of these tactics is the importance of connection. If we get to know our students and show we care for them as a person, their whole being will develop in the classroom and remind students that they are not their grade, like the education system has been telling them.

In 2002, President George W. Bush enacted the No Child Left Behind Act, which sought to attain accountability standards to ensure equal opportunity and performance for all students. Most educators want equal opportunities for students, but this act took the US education system in a direction different from the goal of this act. In order to check if the act is effective, standardized testing was enhanced and increased. They then could prove what kinds of academic achievements and learning occur in schools. Today though, teachers now face pressure to help students reach particular certain benchmarks, standards, or specific number scores. Often to not lose their job, they must prove their effectiveness through the scores of their students. Naturally then, teachers are forced to prioritize numbers and grades over a holistic education for their students (Chevalier, 2011).

Holistic education can be interpreted many ways as it encompasses many a variety of topics. At the heart, holistic education "promotes student learning and growth on levels beyond the cognitive" (Grauerholz, 2001, pg 44). There are certain themes to holistic education that expand the definition such as development of relationships, creating a shared community, managing personal growth and goals, and connecting to the world around us (Mahmoudi, 2012). In each of these instances the student is connecting and growing in a different aspect. For example, managing personal growth and goals connects the student to the whole person which is an internal change. Connecting to the world around us connects the student to society. Creating a shared community could mean many things in different scopes, but one example is the students' connection to the school or class community. Throughout the school year, they could build friendships, communicate with others better, or feel industry in the classroom (Hare, 2006). This could also be applied to a town, state, or even family.

To do this, teachers must incorporate diverse methods that engage students in personal exploration and help them connect what they learn to their everyday lives. Similarly, teachers should help students to clarify their own values, responsibilities, and incorporation to society. With less focus on grades or scores, there can be more focus on deep, individualized learning, making school unique for everybody. Because it is hard to assess the effectiveness of holistic education, it is challenging to advocate for the incorporation into schools. There is not one test on holistic values that can be graded on one scale; the growth is different in every student, and challenging to articulate.

One way to understand the level of holistic growth is using the term "transfer". A low road transfer is something that is almost automatic, it does not require much thinking. For example, multiplication facts become immediate, automatic recall, no abstract ideas along with them. As educators, a goal should be to aim for a high road transfer, meaning the learner deliberately takes what they learned and makes it more abstract, so they can apply it to different areas of their life (Billing, 2007). For example, a lower elementary class could be reading a book about a girl who learns through a series of events to be kind to their classmates. A low level of transfer would be recalling the events of the story. A high level would be after the lesson, explaining the key takeaway of the book: respecting our classmates. To support a high road transfer, teachers should reinforce generalizations after lessons. One way is through reflection of the goals of the lesson or "I can" statements.

One-way schools implement holistic education is through socio-emotional learning(SEL). SEL is "the process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to recognize and manage their emotions, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging

situations constructively" (Casel, 2022, paragraph 1). This definition can be broken down into 5 main sections, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relational skills, and decision making, as seen in the diagram (Casel, 2022, paragraph 2).

Comparing these to the main themes of holistic education, developing personal goals and growth, creating a shared community, and developing relationships, SEL and holistic education are the same at the heart. Therefore, SEL is one of the most impactful ways to be a holistic educator.

SEL is implemented in a wide variety of ways in different schools. Some have it fully immersed into lessons, others have set aside time for a free-standing lesson in addition to their regular days every so often (Casel, 2022). Regardless of which method of implementation the school chooses, teachers must educate everyone involved on the sequence of SEL they are promoting. This means students, teachers, staff and even parents. Parental involvement is key in successful teaching and holds true for SEL, too. Teaching parents the methods of SEL will promote these ideas, even at home. Having SEL ideas implemented into all areas of the student's life may lead to more growth. Lastly, SEL advances educational equity. Supporting and developing all students' emotions uniquely creates respect and growth in the classroom regardless of background. Teachers create deep relationships with our students using SEL because they see them as whole people and they see us as more than just their teacher.

Because SEL focuses on personal growth, rather than numbers in academic achievement, it is hard to quantitatively prove the impacts of SEL. There have been a few studies that have attempted to pinpoint the main impacts of SEL. According to a study by Durlak (2011), 213 SEL school-based programs had significant positive effects on the targeted social-emotional competencies. They also had positive changes in students' attitudes about themselves, in regard

to others, and their relationship with school. Specifically, there were reduced conduct issues, increased positive social behaviors, more problem solving alone. The hope is that this then impacts academics, which they shared it often does.

Payton (2008) conducted a similar study, with very similar outcomes. SEL methods had positive impacts in 5 areas: attitudes towards self and others, positive social behaviors, reduced conduct and emotional distress. If students have confidence in themselves personally, it will often translate to their academics. Also, SEL creates a more trusting and caring student-teacher relationship, as well as student-student relationships(Ashdown, 2012). If SEL creates a better classroom environment, the students may feel safer to share misconceptions in traditional lessons because they do not fear embarrassment.

Many critics of SEL say that SEL takes away from learning time or there is no time for it in their classrooms, but this study shows that the time given towards SEL can be impactful and meaningful. Yes, it can sometimes take away from core classes if it is a stand alone lesson, but there are many ways to naturally implement it into the core curriculum. Overall, students who are more self-aware and confident in their abilities often participate more because they are able to persist in the face of challenges by using problem solving skills taught in SEL.

I have encountered specific ways to become a more holistic educator both as a student in a classroom as well as an intern teacher in the classroom. First as a student, I have engaged in countless projects or problem-based learning. Project-based learning and problem-based learning are "active, student-centered methods of instruction that encourage students to work in collaborative groups on real-world questions or challenges to promote the acquisition of higher-order thinking skills, while teachers act as facilitators of learning" (Ferrero, 2021, page 1). Although they are two different things, they have the same central concept of allowing the

students to be the creators of the learning while the teacher facilitates and guides. As for the difference between problem and project-based learning, problem based is short term while project-based is more long term.

Problem-based learning, for example, could be students interviewing members of their community and determining in their opinion, the biggest local issue. They then formulate solutions as a group and present them. An important characteristic about problem-based learning is that the students determine the problem at hand to be solved. This falls in line with holistic education because the students are allowed to use what learning style is best for them. Do they want to voice record the interview, take notes, recall by memory? Then do they want to present with a PowerPoint, verbally, from a poster, paper, etc.? For this specific example, students choose an idea they feel confident in discussing but also are interested in, which has been proven to lead to greater learning. Students are still learning core concepts while being given choice and agency, so no time is taken away.

Project-based learning is similar because, like in problem based learning, students work in groups to develop ideas, hear alternate opinions, and creatively find solutions, but the project at hand is determined by the teacher not the students. For example, each group has the same goal of creating a garden for a client with specific needs and wants and it is up to the students to determine how. Overall, the difference between project and problem based learning is the product. Problem based learning the product is a solution while project based learning is a whole unit that is completed by fulfilling that solution.

Project and problem-based learning, although engaging and effective, take a lot of preparation time. There are some ways to support a holistic education style everyday through specific routines in the classroom. One way is through daily personal check ins. This way,

teachers know what to expect of our students of the day. A student that has had a full 8 hours of sleep with a big breakfast may not perform the same as one who slept 2 hours and was sent to school without breakfast. Holistic education means taking into account and caring for the whole child. Using these check ins will allow teachers to see the entirety of their students, not just the external actions and choices each day. It helps teachers see, and perhaps understand, the 'why' for their actions.

Another suggestion for quick small changes to teaching is changing the idea of what an assessment is. An assessment does not need to be paper and pencil multiple choice tests, but teachers should encourage assessments with more entry points. These could be things such as essays, take home exams, short answer, etc (Grauerholz, 2001). For essays or writing assignments, teachers should encourage exploratory writing with a more general prompt because it leads to students exploring their emotions and thoughts, and therefore making personal connections to their learning. This is a characteristic of a high road transfer of knowledge.

In general, in the classroom, the teacher should put themselves in the same shoes as the students, and show themselves to be a learner. Admitting mistakes humanizes teachers, so that students feel safe to do the same in the classroom, helping teachers tailor teaching to student needs (Emdin, 2016). One way to do this is to include students in the creation of lessons or give choice. It then feels less like the teacher is the authority in the room and the students are the ones being told what to do. When the students consent to the learning and are interested, there will likely be a better transfer of knowledge. Lastly, out of class learning is a great way to engage personally and holistically with the students, in things such as project or problem-based learning. The teacher is not a master of garden creation, for example, so the class will learn together.

The idea that the teacher is a learner holds true in many topics in schools. If teachers see themselves as equal to the students, and acknowledge that their students are equal to them, and commit to showing that all are learners, students could feel safer and more willing to learn. One area teachers need to maintain the role of a learner is when creating an inclusive and diverse classroom. Each year, with each new set of students with unique backgrounds from each other, teachers have the opportunity to enact holistic education techniques that are specific to their students. Teachers cannot expect one tactic for one student to work for another who might have a different background or experience of school.

To better learn how to holistically help our students grow, teachers must learn how to create classrooms that encourage a sharing of life experiences. As described by Emdin (2017), reality pedagogy, "meeting each student on their own cultural and emotional turf", allows students to share their wounds and learn better (pg. 27). This technique is in opposition to the "savior mentality". Our goal is not to 'fix' our students and bring them to a predetermined benchmark but instead learn and address the conditions that harms them and make sure that teachers are doing our best to not have that in our classroom (Venet, 2021). When teachers break down these barriers or things that trigger our students, they are giving them more tools for success. Another principle of reality pedagogy is making sure it is human centered. There is no one-size fits all method because all students' backgrounds and traumas are unique. Teachers must tailor techniques to students each year, but that does not mean there are no holistic approaches in place at the start of the year. Teachers must have proactive strategies implemented into their classroom practices that can be easily adjusted each year to meet students' needs.

A way to implement this strategy is to have no classroom norm to start out the year. Yes, have classroom rules, but no expectations for students with regard to their abilities or their

backgrounds. Then, students have the opportunity to create the classroom together with their teacher, creating a space they feel more comfortable to learn and grow holistically in. A simple way to describe this idea is transitioning a classroom from a "place to a space". A place is simply a place where students come to learn material, get tested, and leave. A space signifies connection to the students. It is their space to transform into somewhere they feel safe and excited to learn with no barriers (Emdin, 2017, pg.100). If this does not happen, students could still learn content, but they might not feel the safety to grow as a whole person.

All of these strategies have one thing in common: student-teacher connection. At the heart of teaching, regardless of the age of the students, teachers' connection to the students should be the first priority. That can be done through community circles, daily check ins, family connections/meetings, and teachers showing themselves as human.

"Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all" according to Aristotle. This single sentence explains why holistic education is so important. If a child does not feel safe and supported in their classroom, or teachers do not educate their hearts, students may not trust their teachers, or be engaged in ways that open and educate their minds.

Although Maslow's hierarchy is for personal growth, it can be applied to students in the classroom to support this claim as well. Level 1, physiological needs, can somewhat be provided at school but mainly at home. Level 2, safety, and level 3, relationships, go right along with what Aristotle said. Level 2 can be seen in schools as comfort in the classroom in terms of routine and environment. Level 3, relationships, are also a part of educating the heart because it is about collaboration, student-teacher connection, and emotional support. Levels 4 and 5 have to do with self esteem and then self-actualization which is achieving one's potential. One stipulation of Maslow's hierarchy is that one must reach the lower levels before continuing on. For example, a

student might not seek to make a connection in the classroom, level 3, until they are fulfilled physiologically, having food and shelter at home.

Grauerholtz (2001) states "to achieve deep learning, students need to be engaged on many levels- emotional, physical, and spiritual, and cognitive" (pg. 44) but schools have drifted away from this kind of education while putting a more generalized grading system into place. Many of today's schools solely focus on cognitive engagement.

Although there are many benefits to teaching holistically as discussed, there are some drawbacks of this approach to education. Not all students can handle a certain level of freedom in the classroom. Some may misinterpret the end goal with this type of instruction. The key is to help students learn how to make their own decisions with guidance and balance. One suggestion on how to properly find the balance of power between teachers and students is to give freedom of choice to all. When a student uses that freedom properly, give validation to that student. Other students will see that students with behaviors that are synonymous with the goals of holistic education will also be given the validation from their teacher (de Souza, 2000). The students that need their assignments explained in smaller amounts, less freedom of choice, of course offer that. That is the differentiation teachers strive for in their classroom. The downfall of this method is that teachers must know their students well to be able to implement this. Even if they do know their students, there is potential for students to slide under the radar. If a student is quiet and not asking for help and subsequently not challenging themselves, they may slip by the teacher fully.

As shown above, the key to holistic education is balance. There should be equal amounts of freedom and structure, so the students do not feel fully lost. One struggle with this is the time it takes to prepare lessons of this sort. Those who want to enact this type of teaching must put in a significant amount of time to develop curriculum to teach the holistic educational goals

discussed. Not only is there a personal investment, but also emotional. It is proven that when educators start adapting their goals to be more holistic, students will be drawn to them more for support. This means, the personal teaching happens before and after class many times, during the in between times. Many teachers simply do not have the time for this unless they sacrifice some of their personal time away from school. Generally, teachers during passing periods or planning, use this as their plan or grading time. If that time is spent supporting and teaching a student, the teacher will later have to catch up on that personal work. Many educators cannot let themselves make this sacrifice of their time because it can take away time.

Teachers themselves are students too. They watch a mentor teacher instruct and model behaviors across their whole career. They are continually learning how to adjust their craft with new strategies that are coming out, tailoring towards how children are developing in the present day. Holistic education though is so new that there is barely anyone to model after. Teachers cannot even pull from experiences from when they were students, because chances are, it was not implemented at the time. Teachers now are the pioneers of this entire methodology, which can be quite risky and frowned upon.

The most apparent drawback of the holistic education approach is the backlash that will come from other educators or members of the school community. Because holistic education gears students and teachers away from the emphasis on grades and numbers, it is very hard to document the success of holistic education (Grauerholz, 2011). This means, it will be challenging to argue this to the school administrators, parents, and even the students without any measures to prove it works. The whole foundation of a holistic education is the implementation into a normal classroom, it is not a stand alone lesson most of the time. If the goal is to teach agency and choice at the same time as core classes though, what's the harm?

It is not realistic to expect all teachers to fully adapt towards a holistic education system, so one approach is to strive for incorporation into the traditional education system. Methods of incorporation could be daily check ins, socio-emotional learning programs such as Leader in Me, community circles, family connections, and showing the students their teachers are human too. Regardless of what method is chosen to be a holistic educator, at the heart is the connection of students to their teachers as well as their classmates. Teachers, regardless of grade level, should transition their classrooms from a place of teaching to a space of learning.

Without the connection of teachers to students, the students might not learn as effectively. As teachers create more opportunities for connection and places to open up to their class, the safer and more comfortable students might feel in the classroom. This in turn, impacts academics. Students are often more willing to learn from a teacher they feel connected to and who has shown them vulnerability.

The weaknesses of holistic education almost always have to do with an external source; there is not much negative impact on the students themselves. Teachers may lose time in their day for the core subjects, the schoolwide agenda may not support holistic education, and the education system as a whole has no rewards for holistic educators. The only rewards come from the students themselves. Impacts have been seen academically through different studies as well as connections that move beyond the classroom.

Like it has been stated already, it is extremely hard to do studies on the effectiveness of holistic education because it goes against the concept of scores and numbers. It has more to do with the students' connections to themselves, their classmates, teachers, and the schools. If research continues, the next step would be to find more studies that can analyze the effectiveness of holistic education. Socio-emotional learning is always developing and changing, and there are

specific programs or curriculums that are coming out for teachers to incorporate into their

classroom. I would like to learn more about these programs, how they are implemented, why

they are chosen, and how they have impacted schools. I want to try to implement what I've

learned in my own classroom, even as I understand that I will need to continue to read, explore,

and try new approaches that help meet my students' needs.

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