

THE SCHOOL AS A PLACE OF HEALING

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Presentation at the Conference on Holistic Learning for Thriving to be
Wholesome
November 27th, 2018, Bangkok

We live in a time in which childhood, families, teachers and schools are under stress. The rapid pace of modern life is often at odds with the naturally slow, unfolding, developmental needs of childhood. Our “age of acceleration” (Friedman, 2016) means that we are constantly dealing with disruption, uncertainty, new advances in technology, and an explosion of new knowledge. Parents and teachers are tasked with preparing children for an unknown and unknowable future. Despite significant advances in child health and safety, there is widespread anxiety, even fear, about our children’s well-being and future.

With this as context, the task of re-imagining the almost universal institution of “school” gains urgency. Schools have a ubiquitous presence; could they become more than places of learning or career preparation and evolve into centers for a wide range of experiences, capacity building, growth, healing and safety for every child? Such a re-imagination is not a simple task because most of us have direct, personal experience of school, whether through the lens of a student, parent, or teacher. As a result of our direct experience, we hold often unconscious assumptions and expectations about what a school is and could or should be. Eisner (2002) described this with the metaphor of *the yellow school bus*; school is deeply familiar to each one of us and because of that, we are challenged to see other possibilities. Yet, their commonplace role means that schools hold great potential to become life-enhancing centers of growth, hope, unification, and healing for children and communities in our modern, rapidly-changing world.

It can be helpful in the task of challenging our assumptions and pre-conceptions and allowing new ideas to emerge to turn our attention to existing models of schools that are already successfully “doing things differently”. Waldorf education is one such example of successful alternative practice. The author of this paper has been a practitioner of Waldorf education for over three decades; thus, the core principles of this established “alternative” pedagogical approach provide the overall context for this paper. In it, I will make the case for the need to re-imagine schools and will attempt to describe some of the conditions necessary for them to become true centers of healing and community for children, their families, and their surrounding communities.

Waldorf Education: A brief overview

Waldorf education was founded in Germany in 1919, soon after the end of World War I. It was developed by Austrian philosopher and spiritual scientist Rudolf Steiner, who believed that the greatest hope for a better future lay in a re-imagined approach to schooling, a “new art of education” based on what he called a true knowledge of the human being. His ideas on education included: a comprehensive view of human development; the idea that education must address and support human development; an essential role for the arts in all aspects of education; emphasis on the role of the teacher and an imperative for continued teacher development; and a “whole child” approach that addressed each child’s physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and

spiritual being. The approach was initially offered to the children of factory workers at the Waldorf Astoria cigarette factory in Stuttgart. It was revolutionary from the start, requiring - or allowing - all students to take all subjects in a wide-ranging curriculum, educating boys and girls together, and incorporating a range of arts, as teachers worked under Steiner's direction to enact this new art of education. From that first school, Waldorf education has grown steadily to become a widely accepted pedagogical approach. Today, as Waldorf education approaches 100 years of practice, there are over 1,000 Waldorf schools in 64 countries, with almost 2,000 kindergartens in more than 70 countries, plus teacher training centers and curative education centers (Freunde Waldorf World List).

Waldorf schools are typically formed in response to local needs and conditions but adhere to a number of core principles and a distinctive methodology. The schools emphasize the need to create a protected space for childhood, which is recognized as a legitimate phase of life in its own right with unique needs, and the need for sufficient time and space for the slow human process of becoming. Each child is honored as a unique individuality with distinctive needs, talents, and challenges. The education is profoundly developmental: human development is viewed as occurring in seven-year cycles and this is reflected in the school structure and curriculum. From birth to seven years, emphasis is placed on supporting the extraordinary physical development that occurs at this time. Learning is experiential, hands-on, and involves imitation. Many of the activities are drawn from the traditions of everyday home life. A wide range of skills are developed without the pressure of early formal academic instruction. Rather, there is a tremendous need for the young child to be active and to do; learning spaces and teaching style reflect these needs. The teacher is charged with creating and maintaining an appropriate learning environment and with providing security, warmth, rhythm, and trust for the young child.

As the child enters the second seven-year phase, the approach gently changes to reflect new abilities and needs with an emphasis on development of the imagination and feelings. Education is recognized as a fundamentally relational activity and the core "class" teacher ideally stays with a group of children over an extended period—up to a full eight years—to allow for an ever-increasing knowledge of the child and for relational bonds between teacher, child, and family to deepen. This process, termed *looping* in mainstream education, is increasingly recognized as supportive of the learning process and of a child's sense of well-being. The teacher is an important source of stability and knowledge for the child, and these stable relationships are of particular importance in today's mobile society. Reflecting the child's rich imaginative life, story becomes a major teaching tool, supported by artistic activity and with ample time for hands-on experience, movement and play still provided.

The third seven-year phase, 14-21 years, is marked by ever-increasing independence and the development and testing of capacities of critical thought. Young people in this phase are on a quest for truth: they seek to understand what is real, and how do we know this? In an age of increasing use of artificial intelligence and augmented reality, these are urgent concerns. At this stage, students need to be trusted with increasing autonomy and self-direction, and their teachers take on the role of experts and guides. There is greater emphasis on "formal" academics, but the arts, movement, and relationships remain key. Students need to see and feel that they have

agency in the world and that they are able to make a difference. Social action and engagement are important in this process.

This comprehensive model of child development sets the pace for Waldorf education. The curriculum and teaching approach respond to the child's emerging developmental needs; these pedagogical responses in turn support the student's next steps in development. As was true in the original school, the arts are woven throughout the education at all stages and in all subjects. Other characteristic aspects include the use of crafts, story, drama, play, movement, and a connection to the natural world. The curriculum is broad and deep, bringing multiple aspects of the human condition, the earth, and society alive for students. Schools are typically important centers of community life for students, teachers, and families. The school community often gathers together to celebrate a range of festivals that are relevant to the locale and a range of adult educational opportunities may be offered.

Contrasting to educational goals that are often narrowly and specifically defined (e.g. to ensure that a society's young people are college or career ready), Waldorf education espouses broad and life-long goals of transformation of the individual and of society, including the development of free and creative thinking, an awakening of each individual to their unique tasks and abilities, a sense of self that will allow for full engagement, and an awareness of ethical responsibility towards life and others.

The Case for Re-imagining Schools

Why should we explore a re-imagination of schools? Three major reasons can be readily identified: the fact that our modern, fast-paced society is often unfriendly to the slow process of child development, making life challenging for children; the challenge of preparing young people for an unknown and unknowable future; and the current condition of schooling and the prevailing agenda for education.

Childhood under pressure

There are multiple signals that childhood itself is under pressure and that a healing approach is urgently needed. Despite its undoubted gifts, modern life can be unfriendly to the nature and needs of the developing child. As early as 1981, well before the age of the internet, cell phone, and social media, child psychologist David Elkind warned of the adverse impact of modern life on children. He described a society that was placing pressure on children to grow up quickly, creating the challenge of the overscheduled, pressured, "hurried child". In newer editions of his work, he has demonstrated that this pressure continues to build. The results are cause for alarm: for many children, life is fractured, hurried, and at times overwhelming. The Centers for Disease Control report rising rates of childhood anxiety and depression (3.5% in 2007 increasing to 5.3% in 2011). Child and adolescent suicide rates have increased, with 0.6% of all US child hospital visits the result of suicide attempts or ideation in 2008 rising to 1.82% by 2015. Anxiety and depression make young people more prone to school or other health difficulties, compounding the impact.

A large, longitudinal study of the impact of childhood trauma illustrates the urgency and social and economic cost of adverse conditions during childhood. The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACES) illustrated that childhood trauma is widespread and is not restricted to any one

social or economic group but is found across the entire society. Adverse experiences in the study include: the loss of a parent through death, abandonment, incarceration or divorce; parent drug or alcohol abuse; a parent with mental illness; childhood sexual, verbal, or physical abuse; emotional neglect; a mother who is a victim of domestic violence; emotional and physical neglect. These conditions in childhood were found to have existed at least once in two-thirds of the study's adult subjects and had a direct causal effect on adult health and wellbeing. Children who have several adverse factors in their lives are more prone to having learning or behavioral problems in school; the short- and long-term costs to individuals and to society are enormous. For many children, school may be one of the most consistent and stable parts of life, making the need for schools as healing places with a holistic and healing approach even more urgent.

Preparation for a future of change

Schools traditionally and rightfully have the task of preparing young people for further education and the workforce. However, more than at any other time in human history, the landscape of future employment is unknown and unknowable, due to the rapid, disruptive changes caused by technology and the growing impact of artificial intelligence, robotics, and augmented reality. We have seen a rapid rise in an entrepreneurial work culture and the creation of a range of new occupations, accompanied by the elimination of many traditional occupations. The World Economic Forum summarized: "In many industries and countries, the most in-demand occupations or specialties did not exist 10 or even five years ago, and the pace of change is set to accelerate." It also reported that a popular estimate states that 65 percent of children entering primary school today will work in jobs that do not yet exist. They are also likely to need to change careers several times as the employment landscape continues to evolve. An IBM study (2015) found that creativity was the most sought-after quality for employees' future success. However, these are not qualities typically emphasized by schools; rather, there has been a narrowing of focus to emphasize direct training in sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM education) and a declining emphasis on the liberal arts, humanities, and arts, all of which arguably support the development of these essential capacities. In a rapidly changing, unpredictable landscape, our students need to be prepared for a lifetime of learning and to be adaptable, flexible, and resilient.

Current conditions in schools

Although we may wish for schools that are child-centered, developmentally appropriate places in which children can feel safe, recognized, and nurtured in their growth, multiple indicators suggest that schools often fall short of providing optimal conditions for learning, let alone for the attainment and support of children's overall health and wellbeing. In a landmark, wide-ranging 1984 study of schools in the United States, educator John Goodlad described conditions that were often both child- and learning-unfriendly. He advocated for the need to challenge the accepted purposes and formats of schools and to move away from a predominant "factory model" of education that emphasized specific, narrowly defined outcomes of preparing young people for work or further education. He decried the impact of frequent standardized assessment to ensure that the "educational product" is progressing satisfactorily towards the accepted goals. Goodlad found that in schools, "Boredom is a disease of epidemic proportions..." and questioned... "Why are our schools not places of joy?" Although Goodlad's study is now more than 30 years old, there is little to indicate that schools have fundamentally shifted this

orientation or structure. If anything, demands for narrowly defined outcomes have increased, along with the pressures of accountability through various types of standardized assessment.

Holistic Schools for Whole-Child Education

In addition to a need to change the prevailing conditions of schools themselves, one can readily see multiple indications of the need for a healing, holistic approach to education and schools due to the pressure placed on children by contemporary society. Parents, teachers, and students are aligned in what they would like to see: major goals are defined broadly and involve social, intellectual, personal, and vocational development. They seek a whole-child approach for an effective education. The ethos or atmosphere of a school must be positive and welcoming, in recognition of its impact on those who study and work within it. Plus, we must recognize the impact of teachers and ensure that they are appropriately prepared and resourced. Then, argue Goodlad and others, we must trust the knowledge and insights of our teachers and allow unique, localized school cultures to emerge in service of the holistic development of their students.

Our “information age” and the constant and overwhelming appearance of new knowledge could allow schools to free themselves from a primary of transmission of knowledge to a primary role of the development of human capacities. Although we do not know the exact employment landscape of the future, there is ample evidence that those who have developed qualities such as flexibility, an ability to persevere in the face of challenge, creativity, a sense of team work, and problem solving will be the most likely to succeed and to thrive.

Ten Key Principles of Holistic Pedagogy

Practitioners of holistic, integral approaches to education share a common ground of factors that best support the intellectual, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual development and overall health of children. These factors extend beyond the traditional focus of an academic curriculum and classroom and encompass the school environment, families, and extended community; several will be described below.

1. A non-negotiable commitment to the developing child. Holistic approaches are developmentally based and the developing child is the central point of reference. Childhood is honored as a unique phase of life, even as the school focuses on its task of preparing its students for the future. Holistic approaches work *with* the student’s development rather than pushing against it or forcing it. Readiness is an important factor; this requires that teachers are careful and skillful observers.
2. Relationships are central. Education is a human activity and primarily occurs in the context of relationships. These relationships include student to student, teacher to student, teacher to parent, and teacher to teacher. Adults provide important models for social behavior. A range of experiences ensures that children develop social skills. Teachers are mindful that “one caring adult” can positively change the course of a student’s educational trajectory. (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010)
3. Play is a child’s right and is an essential way of learning and encountering the world. Play requires time and appropriate space; this is essential for the young child, but must also be included for all ages. Play develops creativity, supports the imagination, builds problem-solving skills, encourages perseverance, and helps develop social and emotional capacities. Free or open-ended play encourages healthy risk-taking and self-awareness

(Almon, 2013). Play is of such importance to healthy child development and learning that it is recognized by UNESCO as a right of every child.

4. Arts are important in themselves and for the artistic, cognitive, practical, and emotional lessons they teach. Holistic education honors the arts and acknowledges and supports the artist in every child. The arts are important in themselves, providing for self-expression and creativity, and are also important as instructors. Their many lessons include creative thinking, perseverance, courage, decision-making, problem-solving, judgement, and the development of an aesthetic sense. (Eisner, 2016)
5. Fostering connections. We are more connected than ever by technology, yet we are witnessing a rise in various disruptions to human connections: inner connection to the self; student to student; student to adult; student to earth. In a 2018 report, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that 1 in 59 children in the US were on the autism spectrum, a 15% increase in a two-year period. Although causes for this are debated, many experts are encouraging holistic principles of play, direct experience of nature, and significant limits on screen time and media as important health-building factors for all children.
6. Nature. Richard Louv, an advocate for the necessity for all humans to be connected to nature, highlighted the alienation of children from the natural world, terming the results “Nature deficit disorder” and showing how this disconnect affects the ability to focus, concentrate and learn. Louv gathered research to show that direct encounters with nature boost mental activity and encourage creativity, and inspire children to move and play. Nature is an essential holistic educator; ideally, children have ample time outdoors for play and exploration. The curriculum may include gardening or farming. If the neighborhood surrounding the school is unsafe or unsuitable for outdoor exploration, nature is brought inside to the greatest extent possible, through living plants, animals, objects or images of nature.
7. The school environment is a teacher. Young people are affected by their surroundings and deserve places that are attractive and functional. Holistic educators recognize this reality and strive to create learning environments that are aesthetically pleasing, calming, and age- and activity-appropriate. Natural materials are favored for their feel and look and in support of real experience over virtual encounters. There is an emphasis on order and cleanliness and children share ownership of the school space, participating in an age-appropriate way in chores.
8. Use of time and rhythm to support learning. Holistic educators recognize that rhythm and routine are their allies. Predictable daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly rhythms anchor us, reduce anxiety, and free our attention and energy for engagement and learning. These factors are of particular importance to the young child; our youngest students thrive on routine. Predictable rhythms are also essential for children who have experienced trauma, providing a sense of safety and predictability (important factors for everyone in a hurried world). Rudolf Steiner suggested that, for teachers “rhythm replaces strength”.
9. Teachers matter. Parker Palmer reminds us that “we teach who we are” and that who the teacher is matters greatly. Holistic education understands that everyone in a school is a learner, including the teachers. Teachers are important in children’s lives and often have a profound impact. This awareness brings requirements and responsibilities. Teachers are expected to be on a path of continuous of development, not just through traditional professional development activities, but also through the development of inner qualities

such as self-control and mindfulness and of capacities of observation and reflection. Teachers set the tone in the classroom; their inner climate has an impact. They can create a mood of joy or oppression. The teacher is a pedagogical expert and should be viewed as such, with as much autonomy within the classroom and engagement in school administration, especially on pedagogical matters, as possible.

10. Intangibles: consideration of our inner nature. For schools to truly be holistic and to serve as places of healing or respite, they must also include and honor the less visible aspects of life. The healing, holistic school recognizes each individual—child and adult—as a unique entity, imbued by spirit and with an inner life that requires fostering and nurturing. The teacher is a partner and participant in inner development and must also be supported in practices that support reflection, mindfulness, observation and contemplation. Invisible dimensions are essential in the healing school and will be evident in the school’s curriculum and culture. They include support of such characteristics as reverence, awe, gratitude, respect, rhythms and rituals, connection to the natural world, and awareness of the cosmos. These in turn build an essential sense of purpose and meaning.

The healing school in action: Holistic schools for whole-child education and health

The school is a logical site for community life and for providing the conditions that are necessary for young people to thrive. In a reimagined “healing” school, the classroom is just one center of activity. The school becomes a one-stop center for many community activities and needs. It supports families by providing child care for young children who are not yet at school age, support and education for young parents, childcare beyond regular school hours in recognition of the demands on parents, health care services, and a range of social services.

One can easily imagine a school that places the school-aged child on the arc of human development, surrounded by infants and older adults, who in turn become resources for learning and for school activities. Possibilities for cross-generational engagement abound, and the gifts of each individual can be shared.

An awareness of the importance of nature leads to the development of a school garden or farm. Produce from this farm is available to the community, sold at a farm stand managed by students as a real-life lesson in business math. Children become aware of the source of food and emphasis is placed on nutrition and healthy meals. Craft circles, led by a school instructor or member of the community, bring a cross section of the community together on a regular basis, building community, which in turn leads to more community projects. Craft projects are sold at annual fairs or festivals. The school becomes a true reflection of its surroundings; children learn local history and geography and all community members are enriched by a cycle of festivals and celebrations that are drawn from the collective cultures and family backgrounds. Choirs are formed to celebrate the artist in every one, and to offer the joy of community.

Within the classroom, a broad curriculum goes beyond traditional academics and provides integrated and experiential learning that is age-appropriate, guaranteeing the students’ engagement and interest. As students become more mature, they have increasing self-direction in their learning. There are multiple opportunities for self-expression through arts, music, athletics, drama, and community service. Project-based learning supports emerging interests and

encourages students to explore interests, find solutions, work in teams, create, and have an impact on their surroundings.

The impact of teachers is recognized and honored. Their schedules acknowledge the time and effort needed for preparation, observation, and reflection. Their training includes ample hands-on learning and experience and emphasizes the reality that our inner landscape matters. Teacher preparation supports the inner development of these important individuals. Schedules overall are humanized in recognition of the importance of rhythm, breathing, and adequate time – plus the brain science that reminds us that teenagers are not early birds.

The physical environment is appropriately resourced and provides a forum for the many activities of the school. Boundaries between outer and inner environments are softened and blurred. The outdoor environment encourages free play, healthy risk-taking, and gatherings of various sizes. Classrooms are age-appropriate, furnished with natural materials, natural lighting, and soft colors to encourage relaxation and presence.

This picture differs significantly from a typical school and may therefore seem far-fetched or fanciful. However, all of the above examples are drawn from existing schools, either Waldorf or the Roong Aroon School in Bangkok, Thailand. They are possible and can co-exist with the need to teach basic skills, impart knowledge, and prepare young people for their lives. If combined into one institution, this model would offer a powerfully healing environment for students and every member of the school community.

If schools are to provide an urgently needed counter-balance to prevailing cultural forces, they require community agreement, engagement, and support. They must be adequately resourced and prioritized. In reality, a strong economic argument can be made for the healing school's potential in the prevention of later illness or social and emotional difficulties.

The concept of the school as a healing place has many implications for our practice and for society in general. This re-imagining takes us far beyond traditional definitions of knowledge transfer, vocational preparation, or the splintering and separation of subjects and skills or sorting through socio-economic levels or academic ability, common in much of education today. Rather, we can turn our focus to the true needs of the ever-developing human being, and to building health-giving capacities such as flexibility, creativity, resilience, perseverance, and the development of strong, ethical sense of self, all likely to be essential if our young people are to thrive in an unknowable future.

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