

Examining Relationships in Holistic Education

Zian Zhang

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada

The focus of holistic education is on relationships: the relationship between linear thinking and intuition, the relationship between mind and body, the relationships among various domains of knowledge, the relationship between the individual and community, the relationship to the earth, and our relationship to our souls. In the holistic curriculum the students examine these relationships so that he or she gains both an awareness of them and the skills necessary to transform the relationships where it is appropriate.

- Jack Miller

Keywords: holistic teaching; whole teacher; tradition education; spirituality in education

1. Introduction

This paper is aimed at indicating how the course *THE HOLISTIC CURRICULUM, CTL1110H S*, which I took in the summer of 2015 at the Ontario institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, helped me resolve some relationship problems as a student. The course also showed me how to be “the whole teacher”, which Miller (2010) defines as “Whole teachers practice patience, presence, caring, love, and humility. The whole teacher is also a lifelong learner who is humble enough to realize that the journey to being a whole teacher never ends” (p. 96). This paper is presented in three parts: In the first section, I describe three kinds of relationships: Forgiving, learning and caring, and discuss their implications for teacher education. The second section discusses how to become “the whole teacher” by successfully developing community in the classroom. The final section presents a conclusion, which discusses the importance of the holistic curriculum in dealing with issues relating to the relationship between teachers as “whole teachers” (Miller, 2010) and their students.

2. Forgiving, Learning and Caring

What is the role of the teacher? Michele Irwin (2014) also contemplates this question, stating “What am I when I stand at the classroom door? Before I turn the knob and go in, what do I bring with me? I don’t walk through the door merely as *teacher*” (p. 61). Irwin’s questions are important because they show the responsibility of “the whole teacher”, and point to the need for teachers to engage in deep reflection before entering the classroom.

Based on my own experience as a student, I have observed teachers who were certainly not “whole teachers”. I had always envisioned a teacher as being a caregiver, a friend and a parent; this vision suddenly changed during my second year of high school when I met my mathematics teacher. I decided to take the entrance examination for the Performing Arts program at Fudan University. In order for a student to study at Fudan University, he or she needs very high grades; this program helps students increase their chances of succeeding in the overall Chinese university entrance examination. For example, when other universities needed a score of 550, Fudan would only accept students whose scores exceeded 650. However, I was encouraged by the hope that if I successfully passed the performing arts examination, I would only need to get a score of 550 in order to be accepted at Fudan. This examination consisted of two parts. The first part was a writing examination. The second part was a vocal music interview. Before applying and qualifying for the artistic examination, I had to first obtain the certificate in Provincial Level A in Vocal Music. Therefore, at the end of my second year of high school, my parents hired a music professor at a university in our city to help me prepare for this exam. The music professor told me that I should practice everyday so that I could improve my skills in a short time. Learning music was a very intense and time-consuming process. I only had two months left to prepare for the certificate examination, however, my high school, being the only advanced high school in our county, was primarily focused on academic achievement and not on extra-curricular activities; there was clearly a bias against those who were talented in the arts. Therefore, students spent a lot of time studying and were under a lot of stress. As a result, I booked the music room at our school and practiced for one hour after I finished my classes before the self-study started. My father had to drive three hours from my home to the university every week. I was motivated by the tremendous amount of care and attention that my parents devoted to this venture, and I made a concerted effort to learn as much as I could.

Then the nightmare began on my third day of practice. The mathematics teacher who was in charge of our class began to cause trouble for me. He was mad at me and he asked me to stand in his office after I finished practicing. He said many inappropriate words to me, and accused me of having a negative effect on the whole class. When I

went in and out of the classroom during the break periods, I was told that I distracted the students who were doing self-study. He later blamed me, stating it was my fault that our class ranked last in our grade. He mentioned that because I was learning vocal music, the marks of the whole class dropped. He said that I affected the learning atmosphere in our class, and asked me to either stop preparing for the performing arts examination or to leave his class. He would punish me by asking me to stand up during every mathematic class. I was eventually forced to transfer from the science to the humanities department at the end of the second semester in the second year of high school. However, I continued to persevere and I was successful; I obtained the certificate and passed the writing test of Fudan University's performing arts examination at the beginning of the third year of high school. Bases on my personal experience, I believe that a teacher should show care to a student. I believe that a responsible teacher should help and encourage students in pursuing their dreams, rather than asking them to give up their dreams.

I would also like to give another anecdotal example, which illustrates the lack of holistic practice on the part of a teacher by again making reference to my experience in preparing for the performing arts examination. I contacted my music professor before I participated in the vocal music interview of Fudan University. The music professor said that I needed to practice for three months before taking the vocal music interview. The reason was that this interview was quite competitive in our country. I talked with the history teacher who was in charge of our class at that that time, and told her that I had to practice with the music professor in the university on weekends and practice in the music room in our high school during breaks on weekdays. The history teacher immediately refused to accede to my request. She said that it would affect the learning atmosphere in our class if there were a student practicing music for three months. She decided to only give me two weeks, or I had to leave her class. I had no choice but to abide by her decision. As a consequence, I failed the vocal music interview because I spent less time practicing than other competitors. I was the subject of much ridicule when students and teachers of my high school found out about the result. Having failed the artistic examination had a domino effect as I also failed in the Chinese university entrance examination because of my limited study time in humanities. When I transferred to the humanities in the second year, teachers had already finished teaching the content and were in the process of reviewing the material. For many years, I harbored considerable anger and resentment towards these two teachers. I felt that I would never be able to forgive them nor was I able to forgive myself. However, all this changed when I took Professor Miller's courses *CTL1106H S SPIRITUALITY IN EDUCATION* and *CTL1110H S THE HOLISTIC CURRICULUM* during my Master's program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of University of Toronto.

In Professor Miller's class, many students shared their life stories about forgiveness,

which deeply touched my heart. The meditation such as love-kindness and visualization in his class also helped me walk out of the darkness of the past. Meanwhile, Professor Miller recommended many books to us. Among them, bell hooks' book entitled *All About Love: New Visions* had a tremendous impact on my life. According to hooks (2000), "We can never go back. I know that now. We can go forward. We can find the love our hearts long for, but not until we let go of grief about the love we lost long ago, when we were little and had no voice to speak the heart's longing" (p. x). The loss of the opportunity to study at Fudan University had been a source of hurt for me everyday for over five years. However, due to that loss, I studied very hard during my undergraduate studies. I was determined to pursue my dreams of attending this prestigious university to pursue my master's degree. I conquered my difficulties during my undergraduate study. Those around me did not believe that I got accepted to University of Toronto - one of the highest ranked universities in the world.

While taking Professor Miller's class, I started to notice a gradual change in my feelings. I started to realize that if I had not had this experience with my mathematics or history teachers, and if I had not failed the Fudan University entrance examinations, I might not be the person who achieved her goal by working hard and never giving up during those four years. I realize now that during that process, I became a better me and I got to know what I really wanted. Therefore, I decided to forgive the two teachers and myself. As hooks (2000) said: "Forgiveness is an act of generosity. It requires that we place releasing someone else from the prison of their guilt or anguish over our feelings of outrage or anger. By forgiving we clear a path on the way to love" (p. 139). Therefore, I realized that I should forgive my mathematics and history teachers. On the one hand, the two teachers were right; they wanted to build what they considered to be a good learning atmosphere in the class. They hoped that their students could achieve good scores in school examinations. On the other hand, my mathematics and history teachers were wrong. They ignored a student for the sake of achieving her goal in the class. In my opinion, these teachers should listen to every student's opinion. In *Teaching from the Thinking Heart*, Karmiris (2014) affirms that: "Listening with the intention of learning from another is fundamental in teachers' efforts to build community through dialogue in our school" (p. 182). My teachers should have tried to understand my own thoughts towards the performing arts examination and they should have supported me. They should not have made a decision for me or discouraged me without asking for my own thoughts. From my point of view, a teacher's role is to help students achieve their goals. A teacher is a great guide during students' growth.

At the same time, teachers should also show that they care about their students. A teacher once told me that she only showed up on campus when she had classes. She chose to become a teacher because teaching was considered as a stable, safe and secure profession and she could enjoy two months off during the summer time. She taught the

same material year after year. She did not care whether students listened to her in class. She said that if students wanted to pass, then she would let them pass. Therefore, it was a ‘win-win’ situation. She got the salary and students got the passing grade. I strongly disagree with her attitude. As Miller (2010) suggests:

Instead of seeing the school as a factory where people behave as if they are working on an assembly line, the school can be seen as a complex living organism that is evolving – changing through a sense of purpose, collaboration, and a deep sense of inner direction. (p. 92)

Indeed, a school is a small society. Students and teachers should work as a team. Teachers should be present, and then students can sense that teachers are with them. If teachers show that they care about their students, they will then have more energy and courage to progress in their studies. Like Miller (2007) asserts: “Teachers should simply learn to be with students. Students can sense when we are not with them, and if this sense becomes permanent, a deep alienation can develop between student and teacher” (p. 192). He further states that teachers ought to show care through helping students make the link between their own interests and the subject matter at hand (Miller, 2007). It is my belief that if teachers pay more attention to student interests, they will achieve better results from their students because students will tend to be more motivated. When teachers use the same teaching material every year, the material can become outdated and students can become disinterested in the subject matter.

3. Be “the whole teacher”

Currently, there are many news reports in China relating to conflicts between students and teachers. These reports explain that some students never show up to class. Some students never listen to their teachers. Some students even have physical fights with teachers. From a student’s perspective, I believe teachers can apply some changes in their classrooms to make their classes seem more engaging. Being “the whole teacher” is therefore of paramount significance in the education arena. Engaging students to learn through holistic (loving and caring) practices has shown to provide a better learning environment for student growth and development. Engaging a student using fear or strict disciplinary measures, has shown the opposite, creating a negative space.

Furthermore, the whole teacher should create a healthy and caring classroom community. In *Teaching from the Thinking Heart*, Verhaeghe (2014) affirms that a holistic classroom provides a friendly environment for both students and teachers to express themselves freely, allowing them a unique opportunity to be whole people. For example, Miller (2010) points out that when teachers are mindful and pay special attention to their students, students feel gratified. This observation really resonates with

me, and reminds me of an experience I had one evening during self-study time at my high school. I went to the front desk to ask the teacher a question, but the teacher ignored me because she was playing a game on her mobile phone. At that time, I felt very uncomfortable and I clearly felt the distance between the teacher and myself. This feeling could have been avoided if the teacher followed holistic education principles, respecting students and providing assistance to students in need. In addition, this teacher could have been aware of her tone when communicating with students. Students may feel intimidated when teachers only use a serious or stern voice; therefore, making good-eye contact and smiling can help the connection between teachers and students.

In order to build a caring classroom community, it is also important for teachers to use cooperative learning methods (Slavin, 1983). For example, when teacher encourage students to practice cooperative learning, students can be motivated to increase each other's learning, and this has a positive effect on student academic achievement. Another important way of building a healthy classroom community is to use a classroom circle (Johnson, 1984). Teachers could ask students to sit in a circle when students are going to speak and share their stories with the whole class. Creating a classroom will help students become less fearful and feel warmth and love.

Moreover, in order to improve their practice and enhance student learning, the whole teacher can apply three processes or orientations to the curriculum: transmission, transaction and transformation as suggested by Miller (2010). In transmission teaching, teachers help students master academic subjects by focusing on textbooks and explaining to students when they have questions. Teachers will also help students develop basic skills such as reading as well as writing and students should learn to adopt various cultural values from teachers. On the other hand, in Transactional teaching, students are required to develop problem solving, inquiry and critical thinking skills. One of the most important social skills a person can learn is how to resolve conflict in a constructive manner. Furthermore, resolving conflict in a safe and positive manner supports transformative critical thinking skills. This, in turn, will also help students develop wisdom, compassion and wholeness through experiential learning. Therefore, it is obvious that holistic teaching processes are a great "tool for growth and development to prepare students to be productive, purposeful, knowledge generating and humane citizens" (Schrage & Giacomini, 2009, p. 45).

4. Conclusion

All in all, my personal examples show the negative results in education if the teacher is not "the whole teacher". In my opinion, a higher degree or diploma does not necessarily translate into being an excellent teacher from a professional perspective. To

be an effective teacher requires a unique set of knowledge and skills other than the common subject matter knowledge. Providing teachers with the knowledge, skills and practice to become “a whole teacher” is fundamental to education reform. Furthermore, the quality of teachers has been recognized as the most important factor that influences student performance and learning experience. Based on these situations, holistic education should be promoted because it helps to build a soul-to-soul connection between students and teachers. A teacher is also a caregiver, a parental figure to students. It is of paramount importance for teachers to create a trustful, valued, safe, healthy and caring classroom community for their students for positive growth and development. Meanwhile, to nurture the student, the whole teacher should make use of transmission, transaction and transformation processes in their teaching, by incorporating these holistic values. Therefore, I believe that the practice of holistic education will have a positive effect on teaching throughout the world in a positive learning manner. Students will receive better education and become well-rounded persons.

References

- hooks, b., (2000). *All About Love: New Visions*. New York: William Morrow
- Johnson, D. (1984). *Circles of learning: Cooperation in the classroom*. Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Karmiris, X. (2014). *Just Love Learning about Listening, Giving and Forgiving*. In J.P. Miller, M. Irwin, & K. Nigh (Eds.), *Teaching from the Thinking Heart: The Practice of Holistic Education* (p.179, Chapter 20). Charlotte: Information Age Publishing.
- Miller, J.P., (2007). *The Holistic Curriculum*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press
- Miller, J.P., (2010). *Whole Child Education*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press
- Miller, J.P., Irwin, M., & Nigh, K., (2014). *Teaching from the Thinking Heart: The Practice of Holistic Education*. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing.
- Schrage, J., & Giacomini, N. (2009). *Reframing campus conflict student conduct practice through a social justice lens*. Sterling: Stylus.
- Slavin, R. (1983). *Cooperative learning*. New York: Longman.
- Verhaeghe, J. (2014). *Soul to Soul-Teacher to Student*. In J.P. Miller, M. Irwin, & K. Nigh(Eds.), *Teaching from the Thinking Heart: The Practice of Holistic Education* (p.67,Chapter 8). Charlotte: Information Age Publishing.