Wholistic Education: Toward a Definition and Description

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Abstract:

Holistic education has been marginalized, and therefore, its influence in educational, scientific and political areas limited. This paper attempts develop a concise but comprehensive reliable definition and description of holistic education that is suitable for inclusion in reference books. This statement of principles, practices, perspectives and philosophy will be developed through a review of the literature and through a peer-reviewed process involving scholars and associations in holistic education.

Background
In April 2005 I was asked to write the encyclopedia entry for “holistic education” by the editor of the Encyclopedia of the Social and Cultural Foundations of Education. In reviewing the literature on holistic education in preparation for writing an article, I found a wide variety of definitions and descriptions. Who would be considered the authority on this subject and who had the authority to define and describe holistic education for a broad audience of educators? As the incoming president of the American Educational Research Association’s (AERA) Special Interest Group (SIG) on Wholistic Education (WE), I proposed using the membership of that group to help develop a concise, comprehensive and reliable definition and description of holistic education that would have agreement by a large and fairly representative group of educators with various levels of involvement with holistic education. I felt such a product would have more legitimacy being accepted by a larger audience and of being suitable for inclusion in reference books. Through this peer-review process to try to gain feedback and consensus from authorities in the field of holistic education, as well as from scholars in the cultural and social foundations of education, I thought a definition and description would be developed that should be acceptable to a broad audience both inside and outside the field of holistic education.

Wholistic or Holistic
Though I serve as President of the American Educational Research Association’s (AERA) Special Interest Group (SIG) on Wholistic Education and am presenting this paper at that group’s 2006 annual meeting, and therefore used the term “wholistic” in the title of my paper, I will use “holistic” throughout the rest of the paper unless it refers to the proper name. I am recommending that the executive board of the Wholistic Education SIG consider changing their name to “Holistic Education” to reflect the common spelling of holistic. A search on Google for “holistic” brings up about 46,600,000 entries and for “wholistic” about 1,030,000 which is about a 46 to 1 ratio of holistic being used over wholistic (retrieved March 13, 2006). A search for “holistic education” results in 21,400,000 entries and for “wholistic education” only 386,000. Of the first ten entries for “wholistic education”, four of them are links to the AERA Wholistic Education SIG. Each search for “wholistic” asks: “Did you mean: holistic, but search for “holistic” do not ask “Did you mean: wholistic. In the literature and publications on holistic education, the spelling “holistic” is used consistently. None of the sources sited in the extensive bibliography given with this paper used the spelling “wholistic”.
Holistic Education Definitions
The problem of defining and describing holistic education is reminiscent of the problem Aristotle had of defining education.

…mankind is by no means agreed about the best things to be taught, whether we look to virtue or the best life. Neither is it clear whether education is more concerned with intellectual or moral virtue. The existing practice is perplexing: no one knows on what principle we should proceed—should the useful like, or should virtue, or should the higher knowledge, be the main aim of our training? (Aristotle, Politics, 8:2:1337a35)

Holistic is an adjective defined as “relating to a whole, including or involving all of something, especially all of somebody’s physical, mental, and social conditions, not just physical symptoms, in the treatment of illness.” (Encarta Dictionary). This dictionary definition and a search on Google for “holistic” reveal a preponderance of the listings referring to physical health and healing. It is not until the 96th listing that holistic education is first mentioned and not until entry 446 that it is listed again. The rest of the listings are health related except for the occasional site on such things as holistic horse keeping, architecture, law, agriculture or theology (retrieved June 7, 2005).

The Wholistic Education Special Interest Group of the American Education Research Association defines it purpose “To facilitate and support Wholistic Education toward the well-being of individuals and society through proactive, theory, and research focusing on the integration of intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual dimensions of experience.” (Wholistic Education Special Interest Group Newsletter, Winter 2005, p. 1)

Frameworks

Though the principles, perspectives and frameworks of holistic education can be traced as far back as recorded history, the contemporary use of the term is rather new and been described from different points of view. A more recent chronological list of philosophical and psychological influences on holistic education might include the following individuals: Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Montessori, Steiner, Jung, Krishnamurti, Maslow, Rogers, J. Miller and R. Miller.

Perspectives

Holistic education is the most defensible, practical and effective approach to developing well-balanced and healthy people who can be valued contributors to society according to their potentialities and the opportunities available to them. It will draw upon the philosophical, religious, psychological and educational literature to make a case that holistic education presents the most comprehensive solution to the educational concerns facing humanity. It is based on the principles that humans are evolving and we are one human species, albeit, varied in many secondary features. Unless and until all aspect of the human being are considered in education, individuals and humanity will suffer from the lack of balance and the denial of part of its reality.
That the body, mind and soul are integral aspects of human nature and that each must be considered in treating and educating the whole person, whether physically, mentally or spiritually, is an ancient idea held by most of humanity for recorded history. It has only recently been challenged by dominant reductionistic and materialistic philosophies of the twentieth century. The result has been a fragmented approach to studying human nature and education and a growing disillusionment in the current apparently dysfunctional approaches to further human interests and potentialities.

Though earlier civilization had less developed and informed views of many aspects of human nature, they never the less seem to intuit that human beings were made up of more than physical and mental reality.

Method
This research involved a review of the literature to draft a one-thousand word description of holistic education that would serve as a concise, accurate and comprehensive definition and description of holistic education. This article (see Appendix B) of 1002 words was submitted on the deadline date of August 30, 2005 to the editor for publication in the Encyclopedia of the Social and Cultural Foundations of Education. I edited this article very slightly by eliminating the credits and the references and further reading (75 words) starting with my name at the end of the article and by omitting about three sentences, before sending to the WE SIG membership. I have underlined the parts and sentences in the original that were not included in the draft sent to the WE members. I also changed all “holistic” spellings in the original draft to “wholistic” in the WE draft to accord with the spelling of the title of the SIG.

The first draft (see appendix A) of the article for feedback was circulated to members of the Wholistic Education Special Interest Group of the American Education Research Association asking for comments and suggestions for additions, corrections of changes. The plan was to post the draft on a website so that all reviewers would have access to all comments and suggestions and my response to them, much like is done on Wikipedia, so that the process would be more transparent, but the very limited responses and suggestions did not warrant such action. I also asked members of that group to recommend others who should be sent the article for their review.

Results and/or conclusions
First of all, very few members responded and most of the recommendation involved including parts I had taken out. David Marshak, the WE SIG Program Chair was the only person to give some editing suggestions and to question my putting Maslow and Rogers together in one category and my spelling the term "wholistic" when just about everyone in the field uses "holistic". He accepted my reasoning for Maslow and Rogers and I changed the spelling to holistic. Appendix C presents the merged documents with changes.

Holistic education has been marginalized, and therefore, its influence in educational, scientific and political areas limited. It was my hope that a well-written and supported statement on holistic educations principles, practices, perspectives and philosophy could help define and describe the field. It has the possibility to create more interest in holistic educations value and encourage greater exploration and application of its broad and inclusive principles.
Bibliography

Compiled from various lists.


References for Bibliography
The following sites were especially helpful in compiling the above bibliography:

http://www.holistic-education.net/biblio.htm by Holistic Education, Inc. and
http://www.pathsoflearning.net/research/biblio.cfm on The Paths of Learning web site sponsored
by the Foundation for Educational Renewal have the same list.

http://www.pathsoflearning.net/library/holistic-educ-intro.cfm by Ron Miller

Appendix A: Email sent to all AERA Wholistic Education SIG Members on 11/14/05

Dear AERA Wholistic Education SIG Members,

Below and attached is a short draft description of wholistic education that I have written. This
first draft is being circulated to members of the Wholistic Education Special Interest Group of
the American Educational Research Association asking for comments, suggestions, additions,
corrections or changes. Through this process I hope to develop a more accurate and
comprehensive definition and description of wholistic education that should be acceptable to a
broad audience. As necessary, I will share future drafts for further comment until we have a
description that might serve as a consensus document. I plan to share the final results at the 2006
Annual Meeting of AERA and in a future newsletter. Please direct all comments to
rclarken@nmu.edu.

Thank you for your support.
Toward a Definition of Wholistic Education

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Though the principles, perspectives and frameworks of wholistic education can be traced far back in recorded history to early philosophical and religious teachings, the contemporary use of the term is rather new. Definitions, methods, philosophies and descriptions of wholistic education vary somewhat among educators and scholars as it has been viewed from different perspectives, but it is basically concerned with educating the whole person--body, mind and soul--to develop his or her fullest potential.

The terms holism and holistic were coined by Jan Smuts from the Greek words “holus” which mean whole, and “holon” which means entity. Smuts saw holism as a process of creative evolution in which the tendency of nature is to form wholes that are greater than the sum of their
parts. He developed a philosophy of holism early in the twentieth century that viewed reality as
organic and evolutionary, including both its material and spiritual aspects.

The historical philosophical and psychological figures who are considered to have most directly
influenced the field of wholistic education often includes Rousseau, Emerson, Pestalozzi,
Froebel, Montessori, Steiner, Jung, Krishnamurti, Whitehead and Maslow. A more recent list of
influences on wholistic education might include the following individuals: C. Rogers, M.
Although none of these individuals identified themselves as wholistic educators or would be
identified as leaders of wholistic education, their ideas and writings have been an influence on
the field. Wholistic education has some relation to and can to some extent be identified with, but
not limited to romanticism, transcendentalism, humanism, systems theory and integralism.

Wholistic education has developed largely as a reaction to the mechanistic, reductionistic and
materialistic conceptions that have come to dominate popular thinking and education in the last
century. The result of these paradigms has been a fragmented and limited approach to human
development and education that has lead to a focus on developing physical, behavioral and
intellectual capacities for economic and material benefits while ignoring or discounting social,
emotional, psychological, moral, creative, aesthetic and spiritual natures and capacities.
Wholistic education has emerged out of a need to address this imbalance and the growing
disillusionment with the current apparently dysfunctional approaches to further individual and
collective human interests and potentialities. As wholistic education challenges the dominant
worldview and practice in education, it has been marginalized, and its influence in educational,
scientific and political areas limited.
Wholistic educators believe that the body, mind and soul are integral aspects of human nature that should be considered in treating the whole person and that wholistic education is a more defensible, practical and effective approach to developing well-balanced and healthy people who can be valued contributors to society according to their potentialities and the opportunities available to them. Until all aspects of the human being and the environment are properly treated in education, individuals and humanity will suffer from a lack of balance and the denial of part of their reality.

Wholistic education views all aspects of life as interconnected, interrelated and interdependent. As such, it is ecological and global, encouraging an understanding and appreciation of multiple contexts and connections. When we disconnect or dissociate with reality, especially parts of ourselves, we are limiting development. Education should consider the whole person—physically, mentally and spiritually—and recognize that we affect our environment and our environment affects us. Wholistic educators are especially concerned with the failure of modern education to consider the emotional, social and spiritual natures of students. It seeks to develop the full potential of the person in a humanistic fashion that recognizes and honors each individual’s unique talents and capacities.

Wholistic education sees active positive engagement in relationships with the world and others as one of the most powerful means of authentic education. It believes in the innate goodness of people and that they will develop into happy, healthy and well-balanced individuals given the right conditions. Education then is primarily a drawing out or unfolding of the individual’s
potentialities, not a dispensing of information or instilling of learning. To do this requires the educators to be well-developed themselves and to be sensitive, knowledgeable and creative in helping their students realize their true natures. It encourages individual and collective responsibility in and ongoing quest for greater realization, fulfillment, meaning, understanding and connection.

Wholistic education finds traditional education harmful in that it fragments and compartmentalizes knowledge and learning into subjects and discrete unconnected units, encourages competition over compassion and cooperation and is subject- and teacher-centered rather than spirit- and learner-centered. Wholistic education sees the whole as greater than the sum of its parts and that the whole system approach requires moving from the limitations of a rationalistic, linear and simple approach to a more intuitive, non-linear and complex view. It connects and makes a relationship among linearity and intuition; body, mind and spirit; the individual and the collective and the many and varied forms of knowing and knowledge. As a result, individuals attains a degree of autonomy and authenticity that allows them to be progressive agents in advancing their own and others development and welfare.

(Word count-851)

Appendix B: Encyclopedia Article as Submitted for Publication

Holistic Education (Word count-1002)

Though the principles, perspectives and frameworks of holistic education can be traced far back in recorded history to early philosophical and religious teachings, the contemporary use of the term is rather new. Definitions, methods, philosophies and descriptions of holistic education vary
somewhat among educators and scholars as it has been viewed from different perspectives, but it is basically concerned with educating the whole person--body, mind and soul--to develop his or her fullest potential.

The term holism and holistic was coined by Jan Smuts from the Greek words “holus” which mean whole, and “holon” which means entity. Smuts saw holism as a process of creative evolution in which the tendency of nature is to form wholes that are greater than the sum of their parts. He developed a philosophy of holism early in the twentieth century that viewed reality as organic and evolutionary, including both its material and spiritual aspects. These ideas, were published in his most important book, *Holism and Evolution*, in 1926, have recently become more accepted, though holistic educators do not generally regard Smuts as an important influence.

The historical philosophical and psychological figures who are considered to have more directly influenced the field of holistic education often includes Rousseau, Emerson, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Montessori, Steiner, Jung, Krishnamurti, Whitehead and Maslow. A more recent list of influences on holistic education might include the following individuals: C. Rogers, M. Ferguson, F. Capra. J. Pearce, D. Bohm, D. Sloan, K. Wilber, P. Palmer and T. Roszak. Although none of these individuals identified themselves as holistic educators or would be identified as leaders of holistic education, their ideas and writings have been an influence on the field. J. Miller and R. Miller are current writers who identify with holistic education and would be considered leading figures in the field.

From the list of influences above it can be seen that holistic education has some relation to and can to some extent be identified with, but not limited to, the major influences these individuals
have founded, such a romanticism, transcendentalism, humanism, systems theory and integralism.

Holistic education has developed largely as a reaction to the mechanistic, reductionistic and materialistic conceptions that have come to dominate popular thinking and education in the last century. The result of these paradigms has been a fragmented and limited approach to human development and education that has lead to a focus on developing physical, behavioral and intellectual capacities for economic and material benefits while ignoring or discounting social, emotional, psychological, moral, creative, aesthetic and spiritual natures and capacities. Holistic education has emerged out of a need to address this imbalance and the growing disillusionment with the current apparently dysfunctional approaches to further individual and collective human interests and potentialities. As holistic education challenges the dominant worldview and practice in education, it has been marginalized, and its influence in educational, scientific and political areas limited.

Holistic educators believe that the body, mind and soul are integral aspects of human nature that should be considered in treating the whole person and that holistic education is a more defensible, practical and effective approach to developing well-balanced and healthy people who can be valued contributors to society according to their potentialities and the opportunities available to them. Until all aspects of the human being and the environment are properly treated in education, individuals and humanity will suffer from a lack of balance and the denial of part of their reality.
Holistic education views all aspects of life as interconnected, interrelated and interdependent. As such, it is ecological and global, encouraging an understanding and appreciation of multiple contexts and connections. When we disconnect or dissociate with reality, especially parts of ourselves, we are limiting development. Education should consider the whole person—physically, mentally and spiritually—and recognize that we affect our environment and our environment affects us. Holistic educators are especially concerned with the failure of modern education to consider the emotional, social and spiritual natures of students. It seeks to develop the full potential of the person in a humanistic fashion that recognizes and honors each individual’s unique talents and capacities.

Holistic education sees active positive engagement in relationships with the world and others as one of the most powerful means of authentic education. It believes in the innate goodness of people and that they will develop into happy, healthy and well-balanced individuals given the right conditions. Education then is primarily a drawing out or unfolding of the individual’s potentialities, not a dispensing of information or instilling of learning. To do this requires the educators to be well developed themselves and to be sensitive, knowledgeable and creative in helping their students realize their true natures. It encourages individual and collective responsibility in and ongoing quest for greater realization, fulfillment, meaning, understanding and connection.

Holistic education finds traditional education harmful in that it fragments and compartmentalizes knowledge and learning into subjects and discrete unconnected units, encourages competition over compassion and cooperation and is subject- and teacher-centered rather than spirit-
learner-centered. Holistic education sees the whole as greater than the sum of its parts and that the whole system approach requires moving from the limitations of a rationalistic, linear and simple approach to a more intuitive, non-linear and complex view. It connects and makes a relationship among linearity and intuition; body, mind and spirit; the individual and the collective and the many and varied forms of knowing and knowledge. As a result, individuals attains a degree of autonomy and authenticity that allows them to be progressive agents in advancing their own and others development and welfare.

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See also Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Montessori, Steiner

References and Further Reading


Appendix C Merged Edited Documents
Toward a Definition of Holistic Education

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Though the principles, perspectives and frameworks of holistic education can be traced far back in recorded history to early philosophical and religious teachings, the contemporary use of the term is rather new. Definitions, methods, philosophies and descriptions of holistic education vary somewhat among educators and scholars as it has been viewed from different perspectives, but it is basically based on the principle of wholeness and concerned with educating the whole person--body, mind and soul--to develop his or her fullest potential.

The terms holism and holistic were coined by Jan Smuts from the Greek words “holus” which mean whole, and “holon” which means entity. Smuts saw holism as a process of creative evolution in which the tendency of nature is to form wholes that are greater than the sum of their parts. He developed a philosophy of holism early in the twentieth century that viewed reality as organic and evolutionary, including both its material and spiritual aspects.

The historical philosophical and psychological figures who are considered to have most directly influenced the field of Holistic education often includes Rousseau, Emerson, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Montessori, Steiner, Jung, Krishnamurti, Whitehead and Maslow. A more recent list of influences on holistic education might include the following individuals: C. Rogers, M. Ferguson, F. Capra, J. Pearce, D. Bohm, D. Sloan, K. Wilber, P. Palmer and T. Roszak. Although none of these individuals identified themselves as holistic educators or would be identified as leaders of holistic education, their ideas and writings have been an influence on the field. Some key educators who are strongly identified with the field of holistic education today are J. Miller, R. Miller, P. Gang, E. T. Clark, Jr., and R. Gallegos Nava. Holistic J. Miller and R. Miller are current writers who identify with wholistic education and would be considered leading figures in the field. Wholistic education has some
relation to and can to some extent be identified with, but not limited to romanticism, transcendentalism, humanism, systems theory and integralism.

Holistic education has developed largely as a reaction to the mechanistic, reductionistic and materialistic conceptions that have come to dominate popular thinking and education in the last century. The result of these paradigms has been a fragmented and limited approach to human development and education that has lead to a focus on developing physical, behavioral and intellectual capacities for economic and material benefits while ignoring or discounting social, emotional, psychological, moral, creative, aesthetic and spiritual natures and capacities. Holistic education has emerged out of a need to address this imbalance and the growing disillusionment with the current apparently dysfunctional approaches to further individual and collective human interests and potentialities.

**Holistic education is therefore about balance.** Holistic educators believe that the body, mind and soul are integral aspects of human nature that should be considered in treating the whole person and that holistic education is a more defensible, practical and effective approach to developing well-balanced and healthy people who can be valued contributors to society according to their potentialities and the opportunities available to them. When we disconnect or dissociate with reality, especially parts of ourselves, we are limiting development. **Holistic education seeks to develop the full potential of the person in a humanistic fashion that recognizes and honors each individual’s unique talents and capacities.**

Wholistic education sees active positive engagement in relationships with the world and others as one of the most powerful means of authentic education. It believes in the innate goodness of people and that they will develop into happy, healthy and well-balanced individuals given the right conditions. Education then is primarily a drawing out or unfolding of the individual’s potentialities, not a dispensing of information or instilling of learning. To do this requires the
educators to be well-developed themselves and to be sensitive, knowledgeable and creative in helping their students realize their true natures. It encourages individual and collective responsibility in and ongoing quest for greater realization, fulfillment, meaning, understanding and connection.

Wholistic education finds conventional education harmful in that it fragments and compartmentalizes knowledge and learning into subjects and discrete unconnected units, encourages competition over compassion and cooperation and is subject- and teacher-centered rather than spirit- and learner-centered.

Wholistic education sees the whole as greater than the sum of its parts and that the whole system approach requires moving from the limitations of a rationalistic, linear and simple approach to a more intuitive, non-linear and complex view. It connects and makes a relationship among linearity and intuition; body, mind and spirit; the individual and the collective and the many and varied forms of knowing and knowledge. As a result, individuals attains a degree of autonomy and authenticity that allows them to be progressive agents in advancing their own and others development and welfare. Holistic educators are especially concerned with the failure of modern education to consider the emotional, social, creative and spiritual natures of students. Until all aspects of the human being and the environment are properly treated in education, individuals and humanity will suffer from a lack of balance and the denial of part of their reality. Education should therefore consider the whole person—physically, emotionally, mentally, socially, creatively, intuitively and spiritually—and recognize that we affect our environment and our environment affects us.

Holistic education is therefore about connections and relationships. Holistic educators finds traditional education harmful in that it fragments and compartmentalizes knowledge and learning into subjects and discrete unconnected units, encourages competition over compassion and cooperation, and is subject- and teacher-centered rather than spirit- and learner-centered. Holistic education views all aspects of life as interconnected, interrelated and interdependent. As such, it is ecological and global, encouraging an understanding and appreciation of multiple
contexts and connections. Holistic education sees the whole as greater than the sum of its parts and that the whole system approach requires moving from the limitations of a rationalistic, linear and simple approach to a more intuitive, non-linear and complex view. It connects and makes a relationship among linearity and intuition; body, mind and spirit; the individual and the collective, and the many and varied forms of knowing and knowledge.

Holistic education sees active positive engagement in relationships with the world and others, especially the teacher-student relationship, as one of the most powerful means of authentic education. It believes in the innate goodness of people and that they will develop into happy, healthy and well-balanced individuals given the right conditions. Education then is primarily a drawing out or unfolding of the individual’s potentialities, not a dispensing of information or instilling of learning. To do this requires the educators to be well-developed themselves and to be sensitive, knowledgeable and creative in helping their students realize their true natures. Holistic educators encourage individual and collective responsibility in an ongoing quest for greater realization, fulfillment, meaning, understanding and connection.

As holistic education challenges the dominant worldview and practice in education, it has been marginalized, and its influence in educational, scientific and political areas unfortunately limited.