

## **Holistic Education and learning communities**

“To educate a child, you need a whole community”

African proverb

The new education we need is about bringing together being and doing, humanity and nature, science and consciousness, economy and ecology, aesthetics and ethics, head with heart and hands. We can call it a Holistic Education, because everything is interconnected, all is one, all is sacred.

The word holistic comes from the Greek word “holos”, evoking an integrated totality where everything is interconnected. All that exists, from bacteria to human beings, all the way to the galaxies, are not actually separate entities, but instead are part of a web of multi-dimensional interconnected processes. This perspective recognises that all life on the planet is connected in innumerable ways that are profound and invisible – and this web in turn is what sustains life.

Holistic Education brings forth new ethics, because it recognises that life itself is the one true education and it teaches in an unfragmented way. It is a new paradigm in education that cultivates the spirit and cares for the soil, a paradigm that responds to life with wisdom and love, that respects and regenerates nature and pursues the happiness of all human beings.

We humans search for sense and meaning as we face the mystery of existence. Data and skills are not

enough for a fully healthy development of individuals and society. Education, in order to fulfil its mission, needs to accept this fact and radically change its approach.

Holistic Education is mindful of the profound mystery of life and the universe, as well as the reality of experience. And it understands that not only the intellectual aspects of human development need guiding and cultivating, but also others like the physical, social, moral, aesthetic, creative and, in a non-sectarian way, spiritual aspects of life.

It also recognises that everyone possesses vast multiple potentials that we are only now beginning to understand. Human intelligence is expressed through different styles and abilities, and they all need to be respected and encouraged.

Learning is implicit throughout the human experience. Holistic Education recognises the need for teachers, but that in school everyone is at once teacher and student. And the local and global community is ultimately the classroom.

In this way, learning becomes a process that lasts a lifetime. And it is both an inner process of self-discovery and a cooperative activity.

Students need be granted a leading role in their education instead of being the mere object. Holistic Education is about drawing out the best that each person holds within. The learning process is one of self-discovery, of self-knowledge, of self-realization. It

begins when one is born and is constantly developing throughout life. It is like the inner awakening of springtime that blossoms outwards. A pilgrimage through life on which, if we are lucky, family, friends, teachers and community will walk with us.

## **Families' responsibility**

In Holistic Education, mothers and fathers accompany, share and support their children along the journey of development and learning. They satisfy their curiosity, interests and hunger for knowledge, as the children discover other people and their surroundings.

The family will lay a solid foundation for the development of their children's potential if, as well as providing for their basic needs, they offer an education that rests on four basic pillars: attention, unconditional love, respect and emotional boundaries.

Fathers and mothers are the main points of reference for their children, and as such they must respond responsibly. This means getting involved and understanding that any space in which the children are present can be a space of learning.

Difficulties arise when the responsibility of educating children is placed on others --teachers, babysitters, relatives, supervisors, etc. If one believes a child can only learn at school or in an academic environment, then one isn't accepting one's responsibility in the matter.

What can teachers do?

If we want schools, universities and other centers of learning to shed their appearance of knowledge factories and to become living, learning systems, they need a radical transformation. The most important change is the commitment by the teachers themselves, when it comes to transforming the present educational system. For this revolution to take place, this collective has to open up to new paradigms. Teachers must build new relationships with students, with parents and with their own colleagues.

The teacher's attitude, inner work and enthusiasm --in other words his or her "presence"-- is the main pedagogic tool. A holistic educator pursues a balance between freedom and structure, spontaneity and planning, intuition and reason. And, through wisdom and love, creates learning experiences that offer value to the students.

Teaching is essentially a vocation that requires a mix of artistic sensitivity and scientific practice. Teachers facilitate learning, which is an organic, natural process, and not a product that can be created on demand. To nurture this they need liberty, self-esteem, respect, inner work and adequate training in order to design and set out educational settings appropriate to the needs of their own particular students.

Holistic educators also connect students with the wonders of the natural world through approaches that allow them to marvel at life and nature. And s/he must

also show the students how their community life operates socially and economically.

Teaching styles and environments should be created where the youngsters are the ones who generate processes and can show other students, teachers and the community what they have discovered, learnt and developed. The distribution of areas and subject matters needs to become flexible, so that space can be made for collaborative and inter-disciplinary work to take place.

An ideal way to reach such integration is the approach called “project-based learning”, which is about facilitating learning experiences that involve the students in complex, real world projects, through which they can develop and apply talents and knowledge.

The mission for education in the 21st century is to help students learn to learn, to love learning, to accept every context as a source of learning and see him/herself as a student for life. Experiences that can then be adapted to the learning context are essential in order to motivate the students, who are fed up with simulations and anachronisms.

A teacher who does not enter the classroom passionately will not instil passion in his/her students. It is imperative for a teacher to be optimistic, to be a living example and to bring joy, a sense of humour, creativity, enthusiasm and playfulness into education. We need joyful teachers!

## **Learning Communities**

Opening up new channels of communication and cooperation between different members of the educational community is of the essence, so that schools can become filled with life and be permeable to the reality that surrounds them.

The challenge of our times is to contribute to a fairer society that is sustainable and peaceful, in harmony with the Earth and its various forms of life. In this sense, learning communities have a lot to offer.

When a school relates to families, the neighbourhood, the village, craftspeople, associations... and cultivates an awareness of service, it reconnects with the community. As it establishes new, dynamic and open relationships, it becomes an agent of change for its surroundings.

Holistic Education is based on creating learning communities where all participants, from teachers to students, families to farmers, cooks, craftspeople, volunteers to administrators, all participate in the learning process in a continuous and significant way, and where all its members make themselves available to learn and cooperate. Everyone participates, everyone learns.

Learning communities facilitate the creation of learning spaces within and around the schools. This allows for teaching-learning experiences to reach not

only the school's students, but also the rest of the community. In this way, the concept of “school aimed at teaching children” evolves towards the vision of all the members of the network cooperating in order to learn and teach. The processes of cooperation and learning occur within a community context, but in the appropriate spaces and moments.

All the members of the community enrich the process of creating an open and flexible education system, through their participation, dialogue and solidarity, thereby creating unity through diversity.