

## Weaving the Future in Holistic Education: Key Principles and Implications for Serving Today's Troubled Youths and Families

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### Abstract

The main aim of holistic education is to call forth from people an intrinsic reverence for life and a passionate love of learning. Unfortunately, many of today's modern societies appear to focus on the pursuit of material possessions and career advancement. Arguing that spiritual growth is part and parcel of the personal, social and emotional development, education and care of youths, this paper presents some key principles for educators and other professionals working with troubled youths and their families. It concludes that the well-being of our spiritual life not only goes a long way toward overcoming the sense of fragmentation and alienation that so many of our students feel, but will also help our next generation lead more meaningful lives.

**Keywords:** Holistic education; Spirituality; Youths

### Introduction

Current momentum in promoting holistic education is strong and is motivated by researchers and practitioners from around the world. Holistic education attempts to integrate all ways of learning that are available to us. Generally speaking, holistic education refers to an education that attends to all developmental domains such as the: social, aesthetic, language, affective, physical, and cognitive, including the spiritual dimension. The main aim of holistic education is to call forth from people an intrinsic reverence for life and a passionate love of learning. Unfortunately, many of today's modern societies appear to focus on the pursuit of material possessions and career advancement. Rarely is attention given to an education that includes an emphasis on the whole child's social, emotional, physical and spiritual development [1].

Inherent spiritual characteristics of holistic education create context within which the mind, body, and spirit are integrated. In this article, spiritual development is operationally defined as an internal process of identity development involving a greater connectedness to self, others and nature, deriving meaning, purpose, and direction in one's life [2].

### Holistic Education and Whole Child Development

Foxworth [3] once said this, "there is no way to educate without including the whole person. Yet there is no 'whole person' without the spirituality". Indeed, a holistic education that fosters spiritual development of the persons is essential to promote a sense of well-being, and is an alternative "to a more human, meaningful, and intellectually rigorous learning environment" [4]. On the other hand, an education that neglects the spiritual dimension fosters disconnection; when authentic relationships and union with community are absent, a sense of fragmentation and isolation is unavoidable.

For those of us who have worked with young people long enough, we know that today's youths often find themselves actively searching for meaning and trying to discover ways to make their lives more whole. Let us take girls and young women as an example. Girls and young women's struggles in the formation of their body image, a sense of self, relationship building, and connection with the world often reflect an underlying personal quest to achieve a stable positive self-identity, a larger purpose in life, and a sustained connectedness with others—all the necessary conditions for one's spiritual development [2].

As the cultural emphasis on the external/physical appearance increases, concerns about body image and dangerous sexualities are getting stronger, affecting young women substantially more than young men. But of course, we can't blame our cultures for all the problems our youths have. In fact, research has shown that it is one's religious/spiritual orientation that may foster healthy or pathological behavioural patterns [5]. This is a serious implication that needs to be taken into account when educators and other professionals make decisions for education and services for troubled young people and their families. This leads to the next topic.

### Focusing on the Deeper Principles: Education and Services for Troubled and Troubling Youths

As indicated earlier, since spiritual growth is part and parcel of the personal, social and emotional development, education and care of youths, educators and other professionals working with troubled youths and their families need to focus on the deeper level. The following are some of the essential principles to consider:

**Principle 1:** Teachers and youth workers need to help today's young people to create a healthy inner-personal life: mind, soul and spirit. As we help them to define and understand who they are as unique human beings, we also want them to recognize that we live in a culture that tells us many things about ourselves—some are true but many are not. These cultural messages have a profound effect on us whether we know it or not. Today's troubled youths, just like adults, need to form their own authentic vision and values in the face of cultural messages,

especially harmful ones. This is why spirituality deserves a central place in our schools.

**Principle 2:** It has also been noted that teachers' (and other professionals who work with youth) attitudes and behaviours have important impact on student development and that relationships that children (and youth) have with the important people in their lives affect the learning and development of our students [6]. Therefore, though it is important to examine how the curriculum and pedagogical style support students' developmental interests, students' needs in the area of relationship should not be neglected [6]. There is a great deal for us to learn about our youths.

**Principle 3:** In order to empower students to see and embrace their own role in their personal and spiritual development, teachers and youth workers should first achieve an integrated identity that incorporates personal and professional passions.

What exactly is our interior, subjective life like? Does our identity always have to deal with our work? If yes, how should these two be integrated? The following is a dialog that should make us think:

A child asks a doctor: "Who are you, Dr Smith?"

Dr Smith: Well, I am a medical doctor; that is why you call me Dr Smith.

The child thought for a moment, and asked again: "But who you are when you are not a doctor?"

I can't overemphasize the need for teachers and youth workers to reflect on their own identity, why they choose to work with the youths, their passions, and spiritual development. If spirituality and spiritual development are inherent in all people (and not just "religious" people), then schools, teachers, and youth workers need to consider this developmental process in their own lives [7]. This means considering how they create meaning, purpose, and direction in their lives, their relationships with students, and the types of communities to which they belong.

## Conclusions

In a nutshell, holistic education is about building a strong foundation in the life of the child and to help him/her grow holistically. It is about developing the God-given talents and gifts in all developmental domains. Putting and keeping spirituality in schools serves to strengthen our sense of identity and connectedness with others (whether the Divine or human) and the world. The well-being of our spiritual life not only goes a long way toward overcoming the sense of fragmentation and alienation that so many of our students

feel, but will also help our next generation lead more meaningful lives as responsible citizens, committed parents, and caring neighbours."

Lately I have been reminded of Peterson's book *Leap over a Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians*. Peterson's perspective as a pastor and poet can be a tremendous encouragement as we grapple with the "earthy" complexity of the lives of the youths we work with and the deeper principles we should focus on when we work with them:

"The greatest thing any person can do for another is to confirm the deepest thing in him or her to take the time and have the discernment to see what's most deeply there, most fully that person and then confirm it by recognizing and encouraging it."

"Work (or ministry) can conceal our real identity-as we get to know someone, we want to know if that person's job is a role to hide in or behind, or if it's an honest expression of character."

"Pain isn't the worst thing. Being hated isn't the worst thing. Being separated from the one you love isn't the worst thing. Death isn't the worst thing. The worst thing is failing to deal with reality and becoming disconnected from what is actual"

Holistic educators know that the connection with what is "actual" is the integration which requires educational approaches to develop learners as strong and focused global citizens who live their lives with a purpose and a sense of calling. It is time for us to find a way to ensure our well-being now and for future generations. And when we do that, we can weave our future with new action that leads our young people to hope.

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