
Martin, E.J. (2018) 'Is It Time to Rethink Our Perspective on Holistic Education?' in Learning for Well-being Magazine, Issue 6, published by the Learning for Well-being Foundation.

Viewpoint 1

Is It Time to Rethink Our Perspective on Holistic Education?

By Emilie J. Martin

Introduction

As educationalists, we use the term 'holistic' as shorthand for an education that goes beyond academic achievement – an education that also supports the individual's development of socio-emotional skills and their physical, mental and (sometimes) spiritual well-being.

For most teachers, this is not something that needs a label. It is one of the reasons we step into the classroom in the first place and one of the things we find the most rewarding about our jobs. I have never met a teacher who claimed their primary motive for going into teaching was to increase the number of young people getting a grade A in Biology or improving the SATs data of their local authority.

By planning for the development and progress of the *whole* person, we aspire to create an environment in our classrooms in which every young person can acquire, apply and fine-tune the attitudes, behaviours and skills they need to live successful and healthy lives.

There has been renewed interest within the education community in recent years in how well we support our young people in acquiring social and emotional skills and whether this is being done – or can be done – as consistently and as systematically as we teach young children phonics, for instance.

The OECD has now turned its attention to this issue. Earlier this year, it launched its two-year Study on Social and Emotional Skills, which aims to assess how successfully young people around the world are acquiring socio-emotional skills. These skills include things

such as open-mindedness, collaboration and emotional regulation, which have been linked to life outcomes ranging from educational attainment, job satisfaction and mental and physical health.

What is interesting, as far as this Viewpoint is concerned, is that the literature surrounding the study pays considerable attention to the link between the individual's development of socio-emotional skills, and the well-being of the community and society of which they are part.

The development of social and emotional skills is important not only for the well-being of individuals, but also for wider communities and societies as a whole. The ability of citizens to adapt, be resourceful, respect and work well with others, and to take personal and collective responsibility is increasingly becoming the hallmark of a well-functioning society. (Chernyshenko et al., 2018)

Is it time, then, that we moved beyond a view of holistic education centred on the individual, towards a more systems-based definition that would also nurture that individual's understanding of their connectedness to the wider world and the connectedness of all life? And, if so, how can we create an educational experience which goes beyond the whole person to focus on an individual's sense of themselves in relation to something bigger?

There are, no doubt, many ways that this could be achieved. In this article, however, I will focus on the approach that one school is taking to the development of a curriculum that supports children's understanding of their own connectedness and the interconnectedness – indeed the interdependence – of all living things. It is a school that I was lucky enough to teach at as it started its journey towards what we might term a more 'connected' curriculum and approach to learning.

Harmony in education

A little over five years ago, I joined the teaching staff at Ashley C of E Primary School in the suburbs of London. It is a relatively large – and expanding – primary school with 540 children, aged 4-11 years currently on roll.

Over the course of many years, the school had developed a curriculum built around concepts of sustainability and had integrated meaningful sustainability practice into the everyday life of the school. The school hadn't just created a garden where children could learn about growing vegetables. Its allotment was supplementing the school kitchen's procurement programme. The school wasn't simply aiming to reduce food waste. The children were weighing and monitoring the food discarded at the end of every lunch sitting and using the data to help the kitchen staff revise menus and refine portion sizes.

At the time I started teaching there, the school was embarking on the next chapter in the development of its curriculum. It was beginning to develop a curriculum informed by principles that help maintain the health and harmony of systems in the natural world.

The concept was inspired by the ideas of HRH The Prince of Wales, set out in his book *Harmony: A New Way of Looking at Our World*. This explores how principles in the natural world can guide us in the choices we make in our daily lives and in the collective choices we make at a societal level. The book makes the case that we have not only become disconnected from nature but disconnected from the way systems within nature work.

The school was looking at how the ideas in the book could be developed in an education context and applied to learning. From my perspective as a teacher at the school, three of the concepts underpinning the project were of particular interest.

Firstly, children would develop a better understanding of the interconnectedness of all living things and a deeper appreciation of – and connectedness to – the natural world. They would start to understand that, as HRH The Prince of Wales has said, ‘we are nature’ and that nature is part of us.

A body of research already links our sense of connectedness to nature with improved mental health and well-being (Catling and Willy, 2018; Louv, 2005), and specifically with having a better sense of purpose, social connectedness and life satisfaction (Cervinka, Röderer and Hefler, 2011). What impact would the new curriculum have on the well-being of the children, their teachers and the school community as a whole?

Secondly, they would start to explore how effect is linked to cause on a more global scale. They would begin to explore the link between our degradation of the natural world and the damage this ultimately wreaks on our own well-being. Critically, though, they would also be supported in developing a more proactive role in finding solutions to problems.

Thirdly, the children’s learning would be structured in such a way that reflected the interconnectedness of the natural world. Their learning would support them in drawing upon their knowledge, understanding and skills across the curriculum to further their educational experience. This would build on work the school had already begun on structuring learning as enquiries.

The head teacher at the school, Richard Dunne, has discussed the principles of Harmony on which the school’s curriculum is built in his article, ‘Why We Need an Education Revolution’ (Dunne, 2018) so it is not my intention to review the principles themselves here.

Instead I would like to share a brief, teacher’s-eye-view of developing and delivering this new curriculum.

Learning to see the world around us

When the new Harmony curriculum started to be explored in the school, teachers were asked to devise and deliver activities linked to the Geometry of the natural world. These would allow the children to observe and explore the forms and patterns that we see everywhere in nature if we learn to look closely enough. The teaching staff was supported in developing this aspect of its practice by the Prince’s Foundation School of Traditional Arts.

As you might expect, for the very youngest children in the school, these activities were very simple. The children made prints using an apple cut in half horizontally and discovered that the pips were arranged inside five cavities that took the shape of a star. From here, they looked for other places in nature where they could find this five-part form repeated: the human hand, a horse chestnut tree leaf, a star fish.

Meanwhile, older children used sets of compasses to construct quatrefoils and used these to record their observations of a variety of four-petaled flowers in sketches.

These activities required the children to stop and quietly observe one tiny aspect of the natural world that they may never have noticed before or reflected upon in such depth. They began to see forms repeated in the world around them and to learn about the proportions and ratios of nature's patterns. They started to develop a sense of the way in which the natural world organises itself and replicates successful designs. It helped make tangible to these primary school-aged children the idea that there is an order to the natural world that results in harmony and balance.

Among the teaching staff, we reflected on the skills we thought the children were developing as a result of the introduction of nature's Geometry to learning. Things such as improved fine motor skills, came up frequently, as did better attention to detail, accuracy, concentration and resilience. More importantly – in my mind, at any rate – than any of these, was that the children began to see the natural world in a new way, they began to appreciate and wonder at its complexity and beauty.

Developing interconnectedness in learning

Primary schooling in England has a long tradition of cross-curricular teaching built around a central idea or 'topic'. But teaching through topics has fallen out of fashion in recent years, as the standards agenda in education has put pressure on timetables and pushed cross-curricular learning to the sidelines in many schools. Where this is the case, the structure of teaching and learning too often reverts to the structure of the National Curriculum, which divides learning into neat but artificial subject silos, with little reference made between them. Organising a curriculum in this way, contributes to an educational experience that can be piecemeal and disjointed.

The approach to learning that is still evolving at Ashley School seeks to marry a cross-curricular approach that links learning across all areas of the curriculum with the acquisition of robust skills and understanding in Maths and English. Harmony principles provide a unifying thread that is woven through all areas of learning.

By teaching in a highly interconnected way, children are encouraged to make links between their learning in different areas of the curriculum. They experience first-hand through the curriculum the interconnectedness that exists in the world around them. And by starting to draw on knowledge, skills and understanding gained in different academic subjects, their thinking starts to become more 'joined up'.

The school hopes that giving learning this structure will help to achieve a shift in mindset from one that sees things in isolation to one that sees the complex ways in which one thing is connected to another and one outcome is connected to a series of actions. It is in this way that a Harmony curriculum helps children to develop a sense of their own connectedness to the wider world.

This is the kind of thinking that our young people need if they are to take on some of the greatest challenges that threaten the future well-being of humankind and of all life.

Towards a new perspective

Richard Dunne, the head teacher of Ashley School, has argued in his article for this publication for a revolution in education. The revolution I have been fortunate enough to be a part of at Ashley School is changing the way that children look at the world around them.

More than that, it is changing the way they see themselves in the world around them – and how they see the world in themselves. It is helping the children cast themselves in the role of agents of change. As the head teacher of another school that is developing its own curriculum around principles of Harmony in Nature sums up:

'We want to encourage the children to look beyond themselves at the wider world that they will one day play a greater part in. Integrating Harmony principles into learning helps achieve this.'

The revolution is still in its infancy, but it is growing as other schools come on board. And the more schools and practitioners that explore the possibilities that Harmony learning offers to connect children in a more meaningful way to each other and to the wider world, the better the prospects for the future of education of our young people.

Author

Emilie Martin is a teacher and writer. She began her teaching career in central London schools and has been involved with Ashley C of E Primary School for the last five years. She is a contributor to [The Harmony Project](#) which seeks to bring together and support those applying principles of Harmony across many different areas. Emilie has documented the work being done around Harmony at Ashley School and the report is available at The Harmony Project website.

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