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Everything is Connected. Really?

By Karin Morrison

Introduction

How quickly we know what books are worth reading, what films to see, the most popular game and trends that have arisen. We can connect with friends or family in another country, hear about a new medical treatment, know when our favourite foods are on special offer at the local supermarket and when traffic authorities know we have exceeded a speed limit. Even if we are just thinking about a holiday and browse the internet to explore some destinations we have been wondering about, very quickly advertisements featuring these places appear on our screens, and family members can know where we are, both locally and further afield, even if we don't tell them. We are so interconnected without even trying!

Yet are the different systems that have a role in education interconnected?

Why is it that in this interconnected world in which we live, the whole child is rarely seen, realized and appreciated, nor is his or her holistic development nurtured?

Untold stories

Reading skills are judged early in schools. Children who are not reading by a certain age are seen as failures. How can it be that the parents of a little boy, Fred, were asked to keep their son in Grade One for another year, as he wasn't reading at the end of the year and other children were. This little boy was so upset that all his friends were going into Grade Two and he wasn't allowed to be with them. All through school he did not like this, he kept in touch with his friends, but was never in the same grade as them. Over time he did learn to read, but never really liked to. His mother advocated for him so strongly, but the teachers focused on what he couldn't do until, when he was a teenager, they realized this unhappy boy was good at mathematics. So good that he was accepted into a very highly ranked Australian university to do actuarial studies and his first job was in a major international company. His career went in leaps and bound and continues to do so. He now also has an

MBA from Oxford University. But it did take him a very long time to feel comfortable in his own skin.

Another little boy, Rob, wasn't good at 'reading, writing and arithmetic', so wasn't well regarded at school either. A happy little boy who loved riding his bike, playing hockey and taking things apart, putting them back together and making new things. Rob's parents were great advocates for him, believed in him and even though they were advised to withdraw him from school as soon as he reached the legal age to leave school, they simply moved him to another school where there were more subjects offered that were hands-on and creative. Rob did complete secondary school but his Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) results, now named ATAR – the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank, which were an aggregate of scores in all subjects in which Rob had enrolled in his final years, were very poor.¹ It ranked him in the lowest third of senior secondary school students in the state. So what? Marks/grades/scores are only numbers. Rob's happy disposition and his joy and skills in taking apart computers, putting them back together into functional machines and knowing how each part related to others led to Rob's leading career in IT.

Another child, Mary, who had a happy start in an Early Learning Centre and then in primary school even though she didn't read till later than other students, climbed over her first real hurdle when moving from primary/elementary school to secondary/high school. Part of the admission process was assessments. Mathematics in this secondary school was streamed, and as Mary did very well in the maths assessment, she was placed in an accelerated maths class. Unlike in her earlier years, maths tests became a regular occurrence. Half way through the year, Mary's parents were advised that Mary was being moved to a lower level maths class as she wasn't doing well enough for an accelerated maths class. In discussion with her parents, Mary said she liked maths but didn't like tests. The lack of familiarity with the testing process was the problem, not lack of ability or understanding, which Mary showed so clearly in later years.

These stories are only three of many stories where students were labelled in different ways because they were perceived as not achieving what was expected of them in the time-sensitive sequence of events in school settings.

Young people spend a major part of their lives in schools, not just being taught what is on the curriculum, but also mixing with others, building relationships, playing, exploring their environment, ideas and more. As stated in the Editorial of the *European Journal of Education* on 'Learner Agency', referring to schools, 'It would be difficult to deny the critical role they lay, successfully or unsuccessfully, in the nurturing and well-being of students.' (Gordon, 2018).

¹ Victoria is a state of Australia and the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) is the end of secondary school certificate.

Parts, wholes and holes

How can it be that individuals are often perceived in parts? Their strengths and weaknesses often elicit labels. But what about the parts that are missed completely? Is wholebeing ever explored and understood? These missing parts are like holes that diminish the authenticity of what is perceived. How could these holes be filled to provide coherence and continuity in the ways children progress from birth through school, rather than accepting only the parts perceived as the whole picture of each child? In the words of Professor Reuven Feuerstein, 'Don't accept me as I am', and sometimes would preface this statement as follows, 'If you love me, don't accept me as I am.'² What a difference it makes to look beyond the surface of another person. How different do you appear to others, depending on your relationship to them, the contexts and your self-image? There is always a story behind the story.

In the stories above so many parts of these children's wholebeing were missed.

Why weren't the implications of Fred's battle with ear infections throughout his first five years of life taken into account? With ongoing intermittent hearing loss, how could Fred be expected to read at similar times as healthy children? The school also knew that a close family member was battling cancer for all of this child's years at school. This family member lost the battle when Fred was in his final years at school. What could have happened to this student if he didn't have a family that believed in him? Where were the health services and social services? Why wasn't his uniqueness valued other than his mathematical skills when later in school he scored highly in quantitative assessments? Why weren't the social and emotional aspects of development and sense of community belonging considered when this boy was removed from the peers he had spent years with in an Early Learning Centre and the Preparatory year and First Grade at school? What about the emotional trauma of a family member slowly dying before their eyes?

Being able to create something new in addition to rebuilding objects that have been taken apart are not subjects in school that are quantitatively assessed, yet does that result in students like Rob being viewed as failures at school? Here there are large holes in what is valued.

Within schools there are so many separate parts, if the missing parts were sought, understood and appreciated, would not holistic development be fostered?

There are more parts than schools that contribute to children's holistic development. Health systems, government departments, community and social services and more have roles in this. There are connections, but how tenuous are they with schools?

² Professor Feuerstein, a clinical psychologist who studied at the University of Geneva under Jean Piaget, Andre Rey, Barbel Inhelder, and Marguerite Loosli Uster, went on to earn his Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology at the Sorbonne. His research in cognitive modifiability and the clarity with which he showed that intelligence is not fixed, but a dynamic system and all can learn how to learn have had a major impact. He was the founder and director of the International Centre for the Enhancement of Learning Potential, now known as The Feuerstein Institute.

Why aren't medical practitioners in direct contact with teachers? When parents are given troubling news about their children, how much do they absorb and process when they are upset. Medical records have value, but that is limited if information is not clearly communicated to teachers too.

Why are decisions about curricula and pedagogy often made by adults in bureaucratic positions often far removed in time and distance from what is happening in schools today? The world children are growing in is so different to the one in which these adults were at school. Where is the voice of children?

Education in Australia has so much to offer young people, and in so many ways children's holistic development is fostered well. However, there are puzzles too. When looking at the whole picture there are so many parts. Education in itself has so many decision-makers who influence what is happening. Federal and state ministers of education together with the public schools, independent schools and Catholic schools sectors each having their own leaders and structures is just the beginning. This is even before we look at health services, social services, youth policy, cultural and more. Each has different perspectives, people in each work in their own ways and while there is connection between the different parts, how comprehensive and effective is this? Does a reliable and regular pattern of communication exist between the different parts? Learning is both developed and impacted by what happens within and outside of schools.

Perspectives

There are so many stakeholders associated with education and while most would share the goal of students receiving a 'good' education, what are their roles in this? Regarding student assessment everything seems to be limited to numbers. Students see that teachers and parents value high numbers and there can be competition between students to get the highest numbers. Funding debates are a major factor in government decisions and different education sectors are often viewed as competitors with limited collaboration between them. Health services have much to offer, and offer expert help when needed, but how often do all these parts come together to co-create the 'whole', the best in education, that is the professed goal of all?

Governments would like to see their countries ranked highly internationally for their education services and outcomes. For example, in the Programme for International Student Assessment ([PISA](#)), an international assessment which measures student performance in specific areas including reading, mathematical and scientific literacy, which ranks countries and is published globally.

Over the last few decades there has been a dramatic rise in the number of assessments Australian students undergo during their school years. Quantitative measures have significant impact on teaching and learning in Australia. There is nationwide testing. The National Assessment Program (NAP) – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), is an annual assessment for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. The results of these tests are publicized nationally, and schools are often judged according to the results. These tests are in English,

on paper or online. 'NAP provides the measure through which governments, education authorities and schools can determine whether or not young Australians are meeting important educational outcomes.' ([NAP](#))

They are a snapshot of learning taken from assessments over a three-day period and there is much controversy over the accuracy of these assessments and the power and influence they have. It is not unusual for the perspectives of education ministers, school leaders, teachers, parents and students about NAPLAN to vary considerably.

Another quantitative measure is the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). The ATAR is calculated solely for the use of tertiary institutions to compare the overall achievement of students who have completed different combinations of VCE subjects. Again, schools are publicly ranked according to scores achieved by their students.

While the term 'holistic' is rarely used when parents and teachers discuss their hopes and goals for education, when parents are asked what they want for their children their responses confirm that it is more than numbers achieved in assessments and 'covering' the curriculum. They want their children to be respected and valued for their unique identities, a sense of belonging in their schools and communities, and active participants in the shaping of their learning purposefully so they are intrinsically motivated learners.

Holistic development is often the unspoken perspective of parents, sometimes partially framed in the words, 'I just want my child to be happy'.

Media reports and the [My School](#) website increase the prominence of competition in education. At the end of each school year, front page headlines and photos highlight schools and students who achieve the highest ATAR scores. There are also long lists of all schools in a particular state ranked according to these scores.

NAPLAN results and controversies related to NAPLAN are also prominently reported in the media and also on the [My School](#) website which also includes school profiles. Parents often use this website when making their choices about schools for their children. Schools also often integrate NAPLAN and/or ATAR scores and ranking in their marketing.

Very little attention is paid to the fact that some of the schools that attain less than favourable scores have student bodies whose primary language is not English, and/or the schools are in a low socioeconomic area. The quality of education in these areas is not necessarily poor; in reality, several of these schools have a holistic view of their students' development. What and how these assessments measure however, does not provide a complete picture of students at these schools.

The big picture of health systems is connected to education, and safety measures are in place regarding immunisations, first aid, sun safety and more, yet direct connection with educators and management of specific health issues is limited or of a general nature.

Actions

More information about the ways education, government and health systems are now interconnecting to nurture the holistic development and provide coherence and continuity in the ways children progress from birth through school, and also provide students with the skills required to access healthcare when school is over, is available.³

Speaking with students of various ages, teachers and parents from different schools and medical practitioners also provides examples of first-hand experiences.

There is much diversity in education settings across Australia. Diversity of educational philosophies, for example, early learning centres and schools inspired by Reggio Emilia, cultural and religious diversity, some inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream schools, education institutes in children's hospitals and community involvement, with a large force of committed volunteers in organizations that support seriously and terminally ill children in holistic ways seeing them as so much more than patients.

The Department of Education and Training in the State of Victoria now has a Strategic Plan for 2018–2022. Until recently Early Childhood, Schools and Technical and Further Education were separate entities. This has now changed.

'The Plan is to deliver our vision to build a world class education system that creates opportunities for every Victorian, regardless of background or circumstance and gives every learner the best possible chance at achieving excellence. This Plan highlights the work the Department is leading to drive implementation of the Education State reforms by providing early years settings, schools and higher education and training providers the tools they need to drive improvement. The Plan provides coherence across our three portfolios to strengthen our ability to deliver better outcomes for Victorian learners. No sector operates in isolation, just as a person's education and development progresses along a continuum that is not bounded by sectors or institutions. We are focusing our efforts on those areas and key projects that will have the greatest impact and there are already promising signs and improvements in student performance..... Across all of our key sectors – the kindergartens, the TAFEs, the schools, the flexible learning programs and pathways to work, \$3.6 billion in the 2018-19 State Budget has been invested in the work we do and the futures of Victorian learners.'⁴

Health and education: Nathan Fioritti, University of Melbourne, refers to the symbiotic relationship of health and education. 'Happy, healthy and resilient students learn better,

³ <https://mdhs.unimelb.edu.au/news-and-events/health-and-education-a-symbiotic-relationship> (September 2018).

⁴ (<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/department/strategicplan.pdf>) (September 2018).

stay in school longer, and achieve more. The Victorian Government is developing and funding two new programmes, Doctors in Secondary Schools and Glasses for Kids, that integrate healthcare delivery within schools.’ At the launch of the Doctors in Secondary Schools initiative, Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews echoed what the evidence tells us. Health and education are inextricably linked.

There is growing concern about mental health issues and during October 2018, there has been much discussion about substantial funding to provide mental health support in schools.

‘Every Victorian government secondary school will soon have access to a mental health professional, thanks to the Andrews’ Labor Government. Minister for Education James Merlino today announced a new Mental Health in Schools program, which will ensure students are receiving quality mental health care when they need it most.

One in seven Victorians between the ages of 4 and 17 are estimated to have a mental health issue, with prevalence higher in secondary school.

This \$51.2 million program will allow schools across the state to employ over 190 qualified mental health professionals such as counsellors, youth workers or psychologists.

The Labor Government will also partner with the Orygen National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health to promote student well-being within secondary schools.

Schools will have access to expert advice online through a central web portal which will support school-based health and wellbeing teams to deliver mental health plans and support to students and receive advice on how schools should interact with allied community and health services.’⁵

What about you? Where are you in this complex web of education?

‘Be the change you want to see in the world.’ Ghandi

Where do you fit in the picture of nurturing holistic development of children as they grow? Educators and parents communicating openly with each other and working together play a strong part in this. Learning isn’t limited to what happens in classrooms or learning parts of things. There are learning opportunities in almost everything we do. Learning by wholes, as Perkins writes, is in the spirit of learning the whole game.

‘Schools and other settings of learning ask us to do many things that aren’t all that enthralling. We feel as though we are playing the school game and not the *real* game..... Learning by wholes is a theory of teaching, or more broadly, educating. Learning is a much broader category than education. Learning happens incidentally all the time – in casual conversations, in the supermarket, on the street, playing shoot-’em-up video games, puzzling over stock market

⁵ <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/expanding-mental-health-support-to-victorian-students/>

investments.....Learning by wholes is very constructivist, embracing the idea that learners always in some sense construct their own meanings from learning experiences.' (Perkins, 2009).

Building on the ideas of constructivism, when learners actively lead their learning, they will explore subjects or ideas they are really interested in and want to find out more about these. Listening to and getting to know your students and/or your children can help you co-construct learning opportunities and provide provocations that connect with the students interests for learning too. The combination of passion and purpose are driving factors that motivate and engage students and this learning is relevant to them. 'Adolescence and emerging adulthood are particularly affected, however, by the presence of purpose, and purposeful youth not only avoid the risks of self-destructive behaviour but also show a markedly positive attitude that triggers an eagerness to learn about the world. Purpose leads to personal satisfaction by bringing people outside themselves and into an engrossing set of activities.' (Damon, 2008).

Students, remember: 'If it is to be, it's up to me.' You are not too young, too little or not clever enough. You have ideas worth listening to, are able to do things and solve problems in your own ways. While you are younger than many people making decisions, often about you and your friends, and you don't have the same experiences as people older than you, you are curious, open to ideas, have many questions and lots you think about. You often become aware of different possibilities. Even experts don't know everything. Don't doubt yourself when your thoughts are different to those of experts about what is true. Howard Gardner agrees: 'Of course, establishment of truth is not the exclusive province of the expert. Sometimes experts have it wrong – briefly or even over long periods of time. Sometimes the rank amateur has discerned a state of affairs missed by those with much more knowledge and experience.' (Gardner, 2011).

Speak up! Your point of view is important and needed too. 'Children are not the people of tomorrow, they are people today.' (Korczak). Take responsibility for your actions. Don't be afraid to ask for help and offer help too!

Conclusion

The more we consider education and the strengths and challenges of providing learning that matters, the more we become aware of the complexity of this and the number of parts and systems involved.

'We see everything as this or that, plus or minus, on or off, black or white; and we fragment reality into an endless series of either-or. In a phrase, we think the world apart.' (Palmer, 2007)

If we revisit the words of Aristotle, 'The whole is more than the sum of its parts', value the excellent practices and connections that are already present and changes that are taking place, seek to understand the challenges and together we can assist the joining of these

many parts with the analogy of jigsaw puzzles in mind, until we form the beautiful picture of children's holistic development. If each of us participates, even if only moving one piece each, imagine what can be.

Author

Karin Morrison is an educator committed to helping children live their rights, foster understanding, learning and deep thinking. Her career has included teaching from preschool to postgraduate levels, senior executive positions and the establishment of collaborations with renowned international educators, leaders and organizations including Project Zero at Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Her roles have included being inaugural Director of The Rosenkranz Centre for Excellence and Achievement at Bialik College, Director of the Development Centre at Independent Schools Victoria, faculty member at Project Zero Summer Institutes: Project Zero Classroom and Future of Learning and co-author of the book, *Making Thinking Visible* together with Ron Ritchhart and Mark Church. She has also been inspired by the work of Janusz Korczak, Reggio Emilia, Dream a Dream and the Feuerstein Institute.

Karin now works independently as an education consultant, a Core Team Member of CATS, researcher, volunteer with sick children and develops projects responding to current needs.

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