International Handbook of Holistic Education

John P. Miller, Kelli Nigh, Marni J. Binder, Bruce Novak, Sam Crowell

Care of the Soul in Education

Publication details

Thomas Moore
Published online on: 18 Sep 2018

How to cite :- Thomas Moore. 18 Sep 2018, Care of the Soul in Education from: International Handbook of Holistic Education Routledge
Accessed on: 08 Sep 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Over the years I have read and re-read a passage from Euripides’s tragic play Hippolytos, about a young man who spurns the sensuous goddess Aphrodite and honors only the virginal Artemis. In punishment, Aphrodite causes his stepmother Phaedra to fall in love with him, and she becomes distressed to the point of lunacy. Seeing the frenzy she’s in, her nurse asks the all-important question: Which god or goddess has she offended. Is it Pan’s madness or Hekate’s fury?

When things go awry the first question we can ask, with the Greek polytheistic imagination in mind, is which god are we neglecting? Years ago, I invited my class in mythology to sweep the college campus and decide which god was dominant, another way to pursue the same question. They reported back that Saturn ruled the campus with his love of hierarchies, authority, exclusive masculinity, order, testing, and tendency toward depression. I ask that question now about the state of education in the twenty-first century. Who have we neglected?

The answer is: nothing less than all the other gods with their rich, contributing spirits—Aphrodite’s beauty and sensuality, Artemis’s pristine naturalness, Hermes with his sense of fun and love of metaphor, Pan’s love of play, and Zeus’s strong spirit of family and community. One interesting way to imagine holistic education is to picture it mythologically, rooted in all the gods, not just one.

The dominance of one archetypal spirit, known in the Middle Ages as *monarchia*, is my definition of neurosis. Clearly, our way of education is highly neurotic and in need of a therapeutic intervention. If the *monarchia* of Saturn is the diagnosis, then we need a holism of the psyche in our educational methods and attitudes, a deepening that involves care of the educator’s, the student’s, and the system’s soul.

**Paideia**

I first came across the idea of education as care of the soul in Werner Jaeger’s richly nuanced, three-volume work, *Paideia*. There, he uses the phrase “care of the soul” many times. A person educates the soul “by reaching harmony with the nature of the universe, . . . through complete mastery over himself in accordance with the law he finds by searching his own soul.” The goal is *arete*, excellence, which includes “courage, prudence, justice, piety—excellences of the soul just as health, strength and beauty are excellences of the body” (Jaeger, 1943, p. 44).

To live in harmony with the nature of the universe is a worthy goal of education even today. To live in harmony with your own nature is also part of the picture. It doesn’t take much imagination...
to see how this goal could include science, philosophy, athletics, spirituality, and aesthetics. In each sphere, our objective is to be in tune with the world and with our deepest nature.

A holistic approach to science, for example, would not just offer information about the physical world, but also explore the spiritual powers of nature, such as the impact of a mountain climb on a person’s sense of self and world, and on ethics. A school’s scientific nature walk could include a pause to make sketches or paint watercolors, as a way of deepening and enriching a student’s connection with the natural world. This approach would be holistic in so far as it aims at a complete experience of a lake or animals. The holism is about being as complete a person as possible in each learning experience.

Similarly, the study of psychology and philosophy, which can be done at any age, is not holistic and is seriously incomplete when it doesn’t relate to our personal and social quest for peace of mind and good relationships. A statement from the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus applies here: “Medicine is useless if it doesn’t get rid of diseases of the body, and philosophy is useless if it doesn’t get rid of diseases of the soul.” We all need a deep appreciation for the ways of the psyche and how to deal with past traumas and difficult parents and abusive adults. We need ideas about being married and raising children; otherwise we do these things unconsciously and therefore badly. We all need a deep appreciation for reflection on the meaning of life in all its particulars so that we have a personal philosophy of life to live by.

This approach is not personalizing everything that is taught, but it does shine its light on everyday life. For example, many readers who have noticed my use of mythology as a means of taking many issues deeper tell me that the little mythology they learned in school had no relevance to their lives. But now they see how that subject could have helped them deal with many significant turning points in their lives. We could say the same about every subject. It isn’t that the subject matter is not relevant to the student, it’s that the teaching fails to connect the material of study with the people studying it.

Intimate Learning

The dictionary definition of “holistic” may help us go deeper into its relevance to education: “characterized by comprehension of the parts of something as intimately interconnected and explicable only by reference to the whole.”

I want to focus on the phrase “intimately interconnected.” The Greeks might use the word “eros” for this intimacy and connectedness. For them, gravity would be an example of eros in nature, as would the tendency of the planets to remain in their orbits. Therefore, I consider holistic education as necessarily erotic in this broad Greek sense of the word. It is intimate and connected.

I would like to use the word “erotic” instead of “holistic,” but today it is impossible to avoid the strong connotation of sexuality. So, let’s just say that in holistic education the various items studied are intimately connected to each other, and they are intimately connected to the one teaching and the one learning.

You can imagine that if someone wanted to learn about running a business, a good intimate way of learning would be to start a business, or at least apprentice to one and get “first-hand” knowledge. But learning intimacy doesn’t have to be experiential. When I wanted to learn C. G. Jung’s psychology, I read the eighteen volumes of his collected works three times. Now I keep those volumes right over my shoulder, next to my desk, as I write my books. That’s a different sign of intimacy. When I go to Jung societies to speak and give workshops, even though I am not an official Jungian analyst, I feel intimately at home, and I’m received that way because of my knowledge and experience. Do you see how intimacy is a way of sustaining the learning process?

Much of modern education is at a distance. It is like learning about the people next door, instead of becoming friends with them. We sit in classrooms far from any action or materials or events that
we are trying to learn about. We quantify all kinds of information that could be far more deeply studied if we were less abstract. We do all this because we are anxious about being correct. We don’t want to make a mistake or trust our intuitions or make sensual observations.

Walt Whitman’s celebrated poem “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” may be too simple and romantic, but it makes a good point:

When I heard the learn’d astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander’d off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look’d up in perfect silence at the stars.

The Modern Distaste for Mysticism and Emotion

Our educational approach could indeed gain from a more mystical and moist quality. The problem is the anxiety-based emotion we bring to teaching and learning. We try too hard not to make a mistake, and in so doing we learn less than half of what is available. There is no reason why we could not blend the mystical, the emotionally moist, and the numerical into one impressive method.

It isn’t just avoiding mistakes. We are a fact-oriented culture. We distrust anything else as fuzzy, sensational and unreliable. But people do pick up wisdom and knowledge from experience and reflection. Some are especially gifted in this way, and so we study novelists and philosophers who never use empirical methods. Often, it is more valuable to have a good insight than a load of facts.

Another mistake often made, in a similar vein, is to assume that new is good and old is bad. Many books have a clear bias against the past, thinking that we are always getting better and knowing more. But ancient texts and works of art are often exquisitely presented and insightful. You may have to allow for some lack of information that was discovered later, but still you can find insights that maybe were accessible only in that cultural situation.

Personally, I study the ancient Greek tragedians and philosophers because of their profundity and the European Renaissance magicians for their insights into power. Neither had the scientific and technological advantages we have, but neither were they blocked from exploring important issues that may be difficult for us to appreciate.

Education Takes Place Anywhere and Anytime

Another aspect of holism in education is using your entire environment and all your time as resources for learning. When I give workshops, I always ask the participants to think of the course as in process everywhere they go and at all times. The whole of life is a classroom. Therefore, for the younger person, his or her family is an important factor, offering support, information, guidance, creating a learning environment, and even offering some training. When I was a child, my father taught me how to use tools, the basic laws of physics, how to play sports, and how to show people respect. These lessons were easily as important as anything I learned in school.

Therefore, holism can refer to the entire environment of learning, not limiting it to school or to certain times. Our task as educators is to show a person how to learn, not just to offer information and training. A person leaving school after being with a holistic educator should be motivated and equipped to initiate learning on her own throughout her life. The full embrace of life is another significant aspect to the concept of holism.
Let me stop here to point out how these various descriptions of holism in learning stem from a sense of soul. Soul is that element in us that is our mysterious depth and makes us an individual while feeling connected to others and to the human community. It values the arts for the depth and layered presentation of experience they offer. Soul also overlaps powerfully with the spirit, which is our reach beyond ourselves, our appreciation for the sublime and the ineffable. In short, soul is our depth, connection, and reach.

Care of the soul entails attention to its needs of the natural world, the arts, home, friendship, intimacy, deep ethics, and work that contributes to our destiny and to the human community. From the soul viewpoint, a career is not so much about a job as about a life work that offers meaning. A soul-oriented education aims at making you a person of character, love, connection, and the creativity that comes from being a true individual.

We often ignore the soul, to our detriment, because its concerns and milieu are so much part of everyday life: home, family, work, local community, images, reflection and conversation, poetics, and the arts. In some ways it is the opposite of the focus in modern life, where we love facts, solutions to problems, technologies, and quantifications. The soul’s tools are soft and subtle: intimate reflection and sharing, symbolic activities, poetics, and play.

**When Soul is not Included in Learning**

Neglect of soul leads to weak families, a desperate search for meaning, the feeling of being lost, not knowing your purpose or calling, the sense of not being at home, and being at the mercy of powerful emotions connected to the past or swirling autonomously in the present. As I wrote twenty-five years ago at the beginning of *Care of the Soul*, “The great malady of the twentieth century, implicated in all of our troubles and affecting us individually and socially, is ‘loss of soul.’”

It may seem that formal psychotherapy is the main solution to soul loss, but as both an educator and a therapist I learned that, more than anything, bad ideas and faulty thinking prevent us from living more soulful lives. I am certain that holistic education, as I am presenting it here, could bring soul back into the life of individuals and culture, solving most of our problems and allowing us to live more just, free, and creative lives.

Remember that the Greeks sought *arete* in education: courage, prudence, justice, and piety—in general, excellence. Imagine if this *arete* were the main goal of education. Standardized tests would be inappropriate. Quantifying experience and focusing mainly on math and science, technology, and job skills would fall far short as worthy goals. Penalties and punishments would be absurd.

Another way to develop a focused and practical holistic education as care of the soul is to list several qualities associated with soul and consider their role in education. Let me offer ten examples of these basic elements:

1. **Home and Family**: The base of the soul’s life. Qualities of home and family can be part of all learning—the setting and means of relating.
2. **Friendship**: Historically the basic way to relate with soul. The spirit of friendship could be in all contacts between teachers and learners.
3. **Poetics and Metaphor**: Go deeper into facts by perceiving the layers of meaning through an appreciation of narrative, poetics, and metaphor.
4. **Dream**: Dreams reveal the deep stories lived now at the level of soul. Regular, simple dream telling and discussing would deepen any form of education.
5. **Spirituality**: Every aspect of education has a spiritual dimension and relates to (holism) infinite mystery, the sublime, strong values, and an expansive sense of community.
6. **Nature**: In the ancient teaching of *anima mundi* (soul of the world) the natural world is alive with presence and metaphorical meaning. Experiences in nature are indispensable in a soul-oriented, holistic education.

7. **Art**: Both an appreciation of all arts as sources of meaning and fulfillment, as well as creative experiences in painting, music, building, dancing, photography, and all the arts make for an educated and sophisticated person.

8. **Service**: Essential to the soulful life is service to humanity—both local and in an increasingly larger sense. You learn some things only through the experience of service.

9. **Life Work**: Soul offers a strong individual identity that is not superficial but rises from deep currents and inspirations. A soul-based education is interested in a job as an element in the larger quest for a meaningful and contributing life work.

10. **Learning for Learning’s Sake**: Holistic education is lifelong and may change in style over the course of a life. It reaches maturity when the person loves learning for its own sake.

---

**The Teacher’s Soul**

For holistic education to work, the teacher has to be whole, not broken—at least not to the extent that his or her neurosis will negatively affect the learning experience. We are all neurotic to a degree, and we can’t expect perfection. But we have to have dealt with basic personal issues that can interfere with good teaching. Of course, this is true for all kinds of teaching, but it applies especially to holistic learning that relies so heavily on the vision and character of the teacher.

The psychology of teaching is a vast topic, so let’s look at some basics. Perhaps the most important issue in teaching is working out sado-masochistic tendencies in both teacher and learner. Sado-masochism is the display of power in every human relationship. The Sade side, from the Marquis de Sade, known for the extreme examples of domination in his fiction, includes strong influence over what one learns, the implied values, the strong impact of the teacher’s point of view, and the dynamics in the teacher–student relationship.

Here is what I wrote about education in my book *Dark Eros*, published twenty-seven years ago:

> The presiders are ‘principals’ and ‘masters.’ One goes through many years of grades. . . . Educators pass children and fail them. We subject them to examinations. We take them away from the family and keep them against their wills. Education has a long tradition of physical and sexual abuse. Beating, incarceration after school hours, painful repetitious writing, threats of all kinds, ridicule in front of a class, ignorance paraded in public, strict curbs on walking, talking, eating, loving, thinking, imagining, daydreaming, and going to the bathroom—education teems with Sadeian methods.

*(Moore, 1994, 174–175)*

Holistic educators are not immune to these sado-masochistic situations. It is archetypal, deeply buried in the process of teaching/learning itself. Medicine has a similar tendency toward inflicting fear and pain and ghoulish manipulations of the body. These may contribute to our health and are necessary. But their basic presence can lead to unnecessary exaggeration. The doctor can become Frankensteinian, and the educator can easily become an abuser.

A teacher has to deal with this inherent tendency to dominate the student, no matter how subtle that domination may be. One way is to help the student teach himself, become an independent learner and go off in his own directions. Then the teacher and student remain whole in themselves, not split into a single pattern of dominator–subject. A certain degree of strength and influence on the part of the teacher is necessary, but there is a line that should not be crossed, where the student loses his power and can no longer be an independent and free learner.
Splitting the Teacher–Student Pattern

The Swiss psychoanalyst Adolph Guggenbühl-Craig discusses this kind of split in medicine:

The psychic process is blocked. A patient may no longer be concerned with his own cure. The doctor, the nurses, the hospital will heal him. The patient no longer has any responsibility. . . . There are no signs in patients of a will to health or what we might term a conscience of health. They are like school children who believe that only the teacher need be active in the process of learning.

(Guggenbühl-Craig, 1971)

The situation is similar in education. We split the archetype of teaching/learning into two people. Then the student is passive, has no “conscience of learning.” He leaves the responsibility of learning to the school and the teachers and is thus cut off from his own need to learn and his own tools for learning. But the split is not just the student’s fault. Schools are set up to indulge in the split and teachers enforce it. Holism here means healing this split.

Here are a few more ways to avoid or heal the split:

1. Know that education has aggression and vulnerability built into it.
2. Promote and support any effort of students to learn on their own.
3. Be willing to disclose that you, the teacher, don’t know everything.
4. Share power.
5. Plan lifelong learning.

The Teacher as Doctor of the Soul

Those many years ago, when I was so influenced by Jaeger’s book *Paideia*, I found myself charmed by Plato’s vision of a culture dedicated to the soul. In a footnote, Jaeger says plainly, speaking of Plato’s teacher and the sage of his dialogues, “The purpose of all Socrates’s educational activity can be described as ‘caring for the soul’” (Jaeger, 1944, p. 304) In Plato’s *Protagoras*, he speaks of knowledge as food for the soul and warns of those who go around selling their knowledge as often being unaware of the dangers of their wares for the souls of their students. They need to be “doctors of the soul,” as well (*Protagoras*, 313d).

My final word on holism in education, therefore, is to suggest that educators might consider their deep work as taking care of the health of their students’ souls, even as they focus on learning and knowledge. This Platonic or soul-based learning has roots in both the student’s very being and in the culture. Certainly, one of the goals in education is to improve the character of the culture at large by creating deeply educated persons.

Don’t confuse care of the soul with counseling or therapy in a formal sense. I am not suggesting that teachers be psychologists. However, they could understand, as Plato said so plainly, that if you are not concerned for your students’ souls, you can easily do them harm. More than that, you need to know what it takes to heal a wounded soul, because most, if not all, of your students come to you with such wounds. You come to them with your own wounds. Holistic education does not merely dispense knowledge; it does so in a way that both the teacher and the student’s souls are engaged and benefit.

References