ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF THE WHOLE CHILD
Implications for Young Children and Adults Who Care for Them

Tony Eaude

This chapter explores the needs of the “whole child” and how adults should address these, in a world characterized by diversity, fragmentation, and uncertainty and by constant change, the nature of which is hard to predict. The focus is on young children, up to the age of about 11 years old, though these vary to some extent within this age group, and on the whole range of their needs, not just those related to formal schooling. Much of my experience is in an English context, but the implications are similar in other industrialized countries with comparable challenges. While my background is as a teacher in primary schools, known in other systems as elementary schools, many of the implications apply to parents/carers and other adults.

The next section provides a definition of holistic education. This is followed by a consideration of the current social, cultural, and educational context and some challenges for holistic education which this presents. Different aspects of young children’s development and needs are then discussed, recognizing that these are interlinked and must be treated as such in practice. The penultimate section considers the implications for adults with a role, formal or otherwise, in nurturing and educating young children. The conclusion summarizes the key points of the argument.

Holistic Education

Philosophically, the concept of holism presents a difficulty. Holism implies that a whole organism or system is seen as more than the sum of the component elements or parts. However, it is hard to describe an organism or system other than by considering its parts separately. I address this by discussing various aspects of children’s development, in the section after next, bearing in mind the importance of not seeing these in isolation, and encouraging readers to do so. In doing so, some apparently conflicting needs, such as those for care and challenge, pace and space, and structure and freedom, may in practice become less problematic than they might appear.

While many definitions of holistic education highlight particular values, beliefs, and practices, I adopt a simpler definition that holistic education addresses every aspect of individual growth and development, recognizing that this must be understood and nurtured in relation to other people, societies and cultures, and the world around. As a result, holistic education involves far more than formal schooling and must be responsive to individual need and cultural norms.
Challenges in the Current Context

Young children grow up in a time of rapid social and cultural change, presenting different challenges from those of, say, thirty or forty years ago. As a result, there is a danger that they will be brought up, and educated in the more formal sense, for a world that no longer exists, rather than being able to cope confidently and thoughtfully with the challenges they face now and will face in the future. Some commonalities apply to all children, though the culture and contexts in which children live, and, therefore, their needs and adult expectations, may vary. Hence, creating an environment that is inclusive of all children is essential, but harder than it might seem.

Eaude (2016, p. 45) summarizes key aspects of recent social and cultural change in most industrialized societies, drawing on the Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander, 2010, especially pp. 53–55). Among these are:

- changing patterns in the immediate and extended family and communities;
- a higher level of disposable income and possessions for most but not all;
- a much improved level of physical health, though greater concern about mental health; and
- a rapid extension of the types, and availability, of technology.

The next four paragraphs highlight some implications, discussed more fully in Eaude (2016, pp. 44–52).

As a result of increased levels of family breakdown and greater geographical mobility, many children grow up in families and communities that provide less security and support. For instance, many of the structures and groups, such as extended families and faith communities, which provided support outside the immediate family are less available than previously. Many children have to live with difficult issues in their families and communities such as domestic violence, substance abuse, and crime and may have to shoulder responsibilities as carers from a young age, with relatively little support.

Despite recent concerns about obesity, often associated with a sedentary lifestyle and poor diet, most children are physically healthier, though this varies according to children’s background and individual circumstances. However, there are increasing worries about children’s unhappiness and mental health (Palmer, 2006; Unicef, 2007), not only in adolescence when symptoms may make a medical diagnosis appropriate, but in younger children; although, as Unicef (2013) indicates, there is a shortage of comparative data for young children.

Children have access to a wide range of technology and spend significant amounts of time playing computer games and involved with the internet and social media, especially as they approach adolescence. While technology may bring significant benefits, for instance in understanding other cultures, children have come to expect immediate responses and might be uncritical of what they see and hear without explicit guidance. Moreover, the media and advertising exert strong pressure with powerful messages about success, happiness and identity—and how these are achieved. As a result, children are encouraged to see themselves as consumers and have a tendency towards individualism and narcissism. Combined with the tendency of adults to see children as vulnerable and to overprotect them, many children find disappointment and difficulties overwhelming and become brittle rather than resilient (see Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009).

Primary schools increasingly offer a narrow curriculum, focused on discrete, decontextualized skills in literacy and numeracy, the aspects of English and mathematics which can be tested relatively easily. This reflects a strong, explicit emphasis in policy terms on cognitive development, attainment, and performativity (see Ball, 2003), although there is some recognition of the importance of social and emotional development. Despite the rhetoric which might suggest otherwise, little importance seems to be ascribed in practice by policy makers or inspection reports to what in England is called
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spiritual, moral, social, and cultural (SMSC) development, discussed in the next section. Such a view reflects an obsession with pace and what can be measured, whereas much of what is most important in life must be experienced slowly and cannot be measured meaningfully. Moreover, children’s lives have become increasingly “scholarised” (see Mayall, 2010, pp. 61–62) with more demands on children, especially those in aspiring families, and fewer informal opportunities for play and being on their own, or with friends.

Schools, and society more generally, tend to place intense pressure on children, from a young age, to succeed, especially in terms of academic attainment. This is based on an individualized and competitive approach, which values other types of achievement less and so excludes some children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with aptitudes other than academic ones. A view of identity based on looks and possessions and a tendency to overprotect children encourage an emphasis on oneself and a lack of resilience. Many of the challenges and much of the stress that children face result from socio-economic deprivation, mostly obviously poverty, and those factors highlighted above. This is especially hard for those children for whom the possessions deemed to provide identity are not available. However, the pressure on children to be consumers and to succeed academically affects other, more affluent, children in different, but still challenging, ways. Holistic education should help counter many of these pressures and develop children’s sense of agency and the qualities to enable them to thrive in a world of change.

Holistic Education: Nurturing the Parts While not Losing Sight of the Whole

This section considers different aspects of the whole child, remembering that holism implies that these are interconnected. One example is health, which is often considered largely in terms of physical health, or the avoidance of disease, resulting in concentration on aspects such as diet and cleanliness. However, as indicated, there are increasing worries about young children’s unhappiness and mental health as a result of too much stress and lack of physical activity. Yet, increasingly, it is recognized that physical activity and exercise helps to improve both mental and physical health.

A second example relates to well-being and how this is achieved. With young children, the aim of education is often thought of in terms of just wanting children to be happy, with Noddings (2003) arguing that children’s happiness should be one main aim of education. There is little doubt that children learn better when they are happy, though such happiness often results from relationships of trust and care and challenges overcome. However, children from a young age are increasingly encouraged, especially through the media and advertising, to believe that happiness is achieved largely through possessions and with little effort. Eaude (2016, p. 36) suggests that an emphasis on happiness is dangerous and that the idea of eudaimonia, as used in Ancient Greece, is a more appropriate goal. This entails well-doing and well-being, living flourishingly over time, a sustained, rather than an episodic, state, as opposed to being based on short-term pleasure, with happiness often a by-product rather than an explicit aim. Holistic education involves helping children to flourish over time, rather than simply seeking enjoyment through instant gratification.

Different aspects of the whole child’s development can be characterized in various ways. However, I break this down into eight categories, remembering that such distinctions should be treated with caution and be seen as interlinked and overlapping, rather than treated as separate: spiritual, moral, cultural, mental, physical, social, emotional, and aesthetic.

The first five reflect the language used in the 1988 Education Reform Act (HMSO, 1988), in England, which amended the wording of the 1944 Education Act that “it shall be the duty of the local education authority for every area, so far as their powers extend, to contribute towards the spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of the community” (HMSO, 1944). Social and
cultural were added to the 1988 revision, with mental and physical omitted, to complete the current combination of SMSC development. Neither emotional nor aesthetic development is mentioned explicitly, in legislation, but these are closely associated.

While there is not space to do full justice to these ideas, RSA (2014) provides a useful summary of what SMSC involves. In Eaude (2008, p. 56), I suggested that SMSC development involves exploring profound questions as outlined in Table 7.1.

Spiritual is not the same as religious development, recognising McLaughlin’s distinction (as cited in Best, 2014, p. 12) between spirituality that is “tethered” or “untethered” to organized religion. In Eaude (2008), I presented spiritual development as involving the search for answers in relation to questions of meaning, identity, and purpose, including those which may be painful and hard to answer, and that such a search is universal, but can be explored within a religious or a non-religious framework. Hyde (2008) and other writers on children’s spirituality, such as Hay with Nye (1998) and Hull (1998), emphasize relationships and connectedness with other people and the world around.

In Eaude (2016), I suggested that moral education should be seen in two interlinked ways—specifically in terms of explicitly moral decisions and more generally considering the ethical implications of one’s actions and interactions throughout life. I argued, especially with young children, for an approach based on virtue ethics, emphasising qualities associated with character, such as empathy and thoughtfulness, and the importance of children belonging and being part of interdependent communities, rather than just individual will and effort.

Social is closely associated with emotional development, so that children learn to respond to emotions of different types and to interact with other people appropriately. For young children, this is often hard, given that neuroeducational research (see Eaude, 2016, pp. 75–79) indicates that emotion and cognition are closely linked and that the ability to self-regulate—executive function—is not well developed in very young children and reduced when people experience anxiety and stress.

Cultural development is associated with questions of belonging and identity and of extending children’s horizons. The latter may be helped by their engaging with activities such as drama and the arts, but cultural development also involves children recognizing how they, and other people, are influenced by culture and background and being open to those of different cultures.

This emphasis on SMSC and associated areas does not overlook the importance of cognitive development, and children learning to read, write, and compute fluently and confidently, but to argue that education—and success—must be seen not solely in terms of cognitive attainment, but also relates to practical abilities and personal and interpersonal qualities. A holistic view involves education being seen more broadly than what can be measured, or school learning, and must address children’s current needs and concerns, not just preparation for the future, or the skills deemed necessary for employment.

### Table 7.1 Questions associated with different aspects of spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiritual</th>
<th>Moral</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who am I? Where do I fit in? Why am I here?</td>
<td>How should I act?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who am I? Where do I fit in? Why am I here?</td>
<td>What sort of person do I want to become?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How should I interact with other people?</td>
<td>Where do I belong? What is my identity?</td>
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#### Implications for Young Children’s Nurture and Education

This section discusses what young children require to flourish, both now and in a future the nature of which is hard to predict with confidence. While these needs will differ between different children and between older and younger children, there are some common threads.
Maslow (1970) emphasizes that basic physiological needs, such as those for food and warmth, must be met in order for children (and all of us) to be able to face other challenges. Counter-intuitively, children must feel safe before they can be more adventurous and take risks. Young children tend to be engaged and motivated by active and meaningful learning, in a context of relationships with a trusted adult (see Donaldson, 1982, 1992), applying different types of knowledge rather than trying to memorize propositional knowledge or learn decontextualized skills. Relationships with trusted adults who care for them—and opportunities to care for others (Noddings, 2013)—are necessary if children are to thrive and become empathetic with other people. While young children need adult care, attention, and guidance, they also benefit from opportunities to be away from adults. For instance, in a world of constant stimulation, they benefit from chances to be calm and reflective, and to experience nature and the outdoors.

All children bring a greater depth and range of prior knowledge than adults tend to recognize. However, schools often ignore what Gonzales, Moll, and Amanti (2005) call “funds of knowledge” and their cultural capital. Funds of knowledge are the types of knowledge not valued in school, often of a practical nature. These may include interests and expertise as varied as geology and chess, photography and computer games. Children from many backgrounds find that the types of knowledge and activity, their cultural capital, valued previously or in different parts of their lives, is not valued in other contexts. For example, activities such as disco dancing, pigeon racing, and fishing might not be valued in school. Other, more profound, examples include the child’s home language and religious and cultural practices where these are unfamiliar to the school or the teacher.

In a world of diversity and difference, children need both of what Putnam (2000) calls bonding and bridging capital. The former is what enables people to bond with those similar to themselves, the latter to relate appropriately with those who are different. Bonding capital is easier to build up, but bridging capital matters particularly in a diverse world, in order to challenge stereotypes, such as those that lead to racism and misogyny. To do this, young children benefit from frequent opportunities to compare and contrast, particularly looking for similarities rather than differences, at least initially.

If children are to have some idea of what to do when they are unsure exactly what to do, they must develop qualities, the disposition and intrinsic motivation to manifest these, and a sense of agency. While any list of desirable qualities will vary somewhat between cultures, a world of change emphasizes those that enable children to be flexible and imaginative and work with other people. Many qualities, such as creativity, teamwork, and resilience are valued by employers (see CBI, 2012) though this is not the prime reason why they matter, but because they help children to be, and become, the types of people who can imagine new possibilities, interact with others, and overcome challenges. The instant access to information, sometimes of doubtful quality, emphasizes the importance of questioning and the skills and dispositions associated with critical thinking.

While young children need to be protected in some respects, they must be equipped increasingly to cope with challenges and difficulties themselves. Take the example of bullying. While children may require support to cope with bullying, sometimes a considerable amount, they also need strategies to enable them to avoid being bullied, including saying no forcefully, if they are to avoid overdependence on support which might not always be available. This is even more so in relation to cyberbullying, most of which occurs when children are unsupervised.

Bruner (1996, 2006) emphasizes that children, from a very young age, are active learners, trying to make sense of a complex and confusing range of experiences. In Pollard’s (Pollard with Filer, 1996, p. 91) words, “it is essential that (children) exercise a significant degree of control of the (learning) process so that they can build on intrinsic motivation where that exists.” Unless they have
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a sense of agency, of control over their learning and lives, children are likely to become passive, dependent, and disengaged.

Young children learn a great deal through play. In particular, play helps develop many social and emotional skills, such as understanding unspoken cues and turn taking, and a theory of mind—the recognition that other people see the world differently from oneself. Moreover, it is worth pondering Winnicott’s (1980) words “it is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality. It is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self” (p. 63).

Bruner argues (2006, p. 23) that experience must be re-presented using one of three main modes: enactive, by doing, iconic, by observing and drawing, and symbolic, especially using language. Young children—up to the age of about 7 years—find it easier to process experience more through activity and visual modes than through language. This does not mean that adults should not use language, but that they should not rely on it as the main means of learning, and that young children, especially up to about 7 years old, but also subsequently, benefit from many different types of experience and ways of re-presenting it.

The humanities and the arts are not only enjoyable and engaging and help to develop skills that can be transferred to other subject areas, but offer opportunities to exercise and strengthen many desirable qualities. For instance, drama provides chances to be playful, to exercise imagination, and to manifest creativity. In Eaude (2017), I argue against seeing the humanities in terms of discrete subjects such as history, geography, and religious education—recognizing that in some countries such subjects may be grouped under broader areas of learning and that religious education might not be permitted. Rather, the humanities involve the study of human beings and the cultures in which they live, and the arts offer different ways of representing experience and expressing one’s feelings.

Children, like adults, learn much of what is most important, especially beliefs and ways of working and interacting, by adult example and participation within communities of practice (Cox, 2017; Lave & Wenger, 1991) rather than direct instruction. For instance, respect and teamwork are best learned—and bridging capital built up—by cooperating with other people in a diverse range of situations and groups; thinking and working creatively is enhanced by adults who do so. This highlights the importance of the learning environment, as discussed in the next section.

Implications for Adults Working with Young Children

Many of the implications for adults follow logically from the previous discussion. For children to develop the qualities and dispositions highlighted requires adults to focus on how they act and interact reciprocally with children. In particular, the need for children to be engaged and to belong—and the danger of them otherwise being passive or belonging to groups which will not enable them to thrive—emphasizes the importance of adults creating a genuinely inclusive learning environment, with relationships of mutual trust and respect.

As Graham and Slee (2008, p. 278) write, “to include is not necessarily to be inclusive.” In particular, inclusion requires a sensitivity, and responsiveness, to children’s background and culture. The key, in terms of schools, is whether inclusion is understood as trying to adapt children to types of teaching that have typically served some children better than others, or as changing these (Thomson & Hall, 2015). In Eaude (2014), I explored the idea of hospitable space, where all children are welcomed, nurtured, and attended to and given a broad range of opportunities, and adults respect what children bring to the situation, even where this is not what is normally valued in formal school settings. However, one should note Nouwen’s insight (Eaude, 2014, p. 245) that creating hospitable space is very hard in schools where individual success and competition with others are paramount.
To be inclusive, adults must try to:

- create environments in which children feel safe, but are challenged, especially setting their own challenges, and where there is a broad and engaging range of opportunities and space for reflection, as well as pace and energy;
- establish boundaries which help to contain anxiety but which are not restrictive, balancing structure and freedom;
- change the locus of control so that children develop a sense of agency and qualities such as resilience and intrinsic motivation;
- draw on children’s “funds of knowledge” and cultural capital, seeing children as inexperienced rather than incompetent learners;
- encourage children to question and explore rather than adults always providing, and being expected to provide, answers;
- manifest qualities such as care, respect, and enthusiasm, given the importance of example and role modelling.

For teachers, if one is teaching the whole child, one must assess the whole child. However, this does not mean that one should measure everything, especially those aspects of the whole child (or people more generally) which are inherently not open to meaningful measurement. Such an approach suggests ending the current obsession with data and learning being seen as linear and hierarchical.

Holistic education requires adults to reassess the aims of education and the means to achieve these. An inclusive approach requires that adults challenge many of the assumptions of the current system of schooling and their own. For instance, adults must recognize, and help others to recognize, that:

- ability and intelligence are not fixed but can be enhanced by practice and hard work (see Dweck’s (2000) work on growth mindset);
- knowledge is not just propositional, but procedural and personal/interpersonal (see Eaude, 2011, pp. 62–65);
- success is to be understood more broadly than in terms of academic attainment or possessions and celebrity.

The school curriculum currently offered to young children too often fails to meet many of their needs. However, education should not be equated with schooling. Adults must try to ensure that the needs of the whole child are met. In particular, adults must avoid scholarizing children’s lives or overprotecting them, but see them as active, capable learners, though requiring support and guidance. This is helped where different adults—parents/carers, the extended family, professionals, and other significant adults—work together. This can be harder than it might seem. While parents/carers, teachers, and other influential adults, such as grandparents or leaders of voluntary groups, have distinctive roles, these must, as far as possible, be complementary, if young children are not to receive conflicting and potentially confusing messages. However, adults can also help to compensate when children get too much or too little from other sources. So, for instance, where children lack opportunities to play or engage in art or music at school, other adults can seek to provide these outside school, and schools can, obviously, offer opportunities that some children miss out on at home.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that young children have distinctive needs and should not be seen as small, undeveloped adults. Adults should try to see young children as a whole, rather than just in relation to
discrete aspects. This applies especially to parents/carers and teachers, because of their broad remit, but also to those with more specific roles, such as faith-based, or other, group leaders or sports coaches. The challenges of growing up in a world of diversity and constant change requires qualities such as respect, resilience, and empathy and the disposition and motivation to manifest these in different situations. Children must be equipped by being protected and interdependent as well as independent from a young age. Such an approach entails a radical change of priorities, especially in relation to formal schooling. In particular, children must be, and be seen as, active participants in their own learning and in their search for meaning, identity, and purpose rather than just vessels to be filled with propositional knowledge, which can then be measured and the child graded. A holistic approach highlights the importance of children belonging within inclusive environments, where diversity is welcomed and trusting relationships are created. Inclusive environments provide a range of opportunities that is broader and more enjoyable and meaningful than that currently offered in most schools, notably in terms of play, the humanities, and the arts. In such environments, adults encourage and set a good example, especially in terms of questioning, risk-taking, and learning from mistakes, and manifesting qualities such as respect, thoughtfulness, and enthusiasm. Such an approach entails adults challenging, and helping children increasingly to challenge, many current assumptions about ideas such as intelligence, ability, and success.

References


