

Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

The Holistic Curriculum (3rd ed.)

By John P. Miller

University of Toronto Press, 2019, 239 pages

ISBN: 978-1-4875-0413-7 (cloth), ISBN: 978-1-4875-2317-6 (paper)

Reviewed by:

Chenkai Chi, University of Windsor, Canada

Yuchen Jiang, University of Edinburgh, UK

Si-han Hua, University College London, UK

Bowen Huang, Peking University, China

John Miller's monograph, *The Holistic Curriculum*, confirms his leadership in the movement of holistic education and has been a classic work in the field of curriculum study since its first edition was published in 1988. In 2019, the volume was updated to the third edition and includes examples from a holistic curriculum experiment at the Equinox Holistic Alternative School, which has achieved significant success since its opening in 2009. Through the lens of three basic principles—balance, inclusion, and connection—Miller conceptualizes holism and holistic curriculum with an illustration of six curriculum relationships: intuition, body-mind, subject, community, earth, and soul. He highlights the subjectivity and spirituality of student development and provides effective guidance for the concepts of curriculum and time presence. The third edition also discusses how holistic education resonates with Indigenous approaches to education and provides examples from teacher learners' practice in the course *The Holistic Curriculum*, which Miller teaches at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto.

Miller's monograph is organized in two parts with 12 chapters and an appendix. In Part 1, Miller establishes the context of the holistic curriculum in five chapters. He begins with an overall introduction of the holistic curriculum and then articulates its philosophical underpinnings with a discussion of perennial philosophy, grounded in the revelation that all things are ultimately connected. The next three chapters respectively examine the psychological, social, and historical contexts of a holistic curriculum. In Miller's opinion, holistic education shares fundamental characteristics with Indigenous education: It focuses on 'sacredness,' 'wholeness,' and 'interconnectedness,' and both are devoted to facilitating the comprehensive development of students. The second part of the book explores pedagogical practices that help students gain an awareness of and skills to manifest the six curriculum connections. It is worth noting that, as Ron Miller (1992) suggests, holistic education is a paradigm rather than merely a teaching strategy and can be applied creatively in different class settings.

Miller balances several theories and establishes multiple connections in the teaching process. His position on breaking binary thinking emphasizes the importance of balance because all aspects of human life are interrelated. Educators must therefore respect the connections as well as the dynamic and interactive relationships in education. Children are not isolated individuals; rather, they are part of a whole. The brain is not the only organ that teachers should be concerned about in learning contexts, as other body parts also contribute to the learning process. With the establishment of multiple connections, teachers can holistically support a combination of elements that enables learning to become more meaningful and helps students to develop in a more holistic way.

According to Miller, "Indigenous peoples were the first holistic educators. They saw the interconnectedness of life, which is referred to as the 'web of life'" (p. 65). He outlines three Indigenous ways of knowing: (1) interconnectedness of life, (2) a sense of sacred, and (3) educating the whole person. Miller argues that a sense of sacred, meaning that "the cosmos, the earth, and its inhabitants are viewed as sacred and imbued with wonder" (p. 66) has been ignored due to a materialistic and consumerist mindset. He vividly argues that people "have forgotten how to be enchanted by looking at the stars, feeling the wind on our face, or smelling grass after it has rained" (p. 66). As a result, Indigenous ways of knowing conflict with an educational system that values compartmentalized knowledge and devalues mind, body, and spirit, which negatively impacts students' academic achievements (White, 2022). By contrast, Morcom (2017) demonstrates

an insightful example of how teachers followed the Western curriculum and met all the mandatory expectations while also teaching holistically from a perspective of Indigenous educational philosophy.

Another important aspect that Miller highlights is integrated curriculum that can operate at multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary levels. In multidisciplinary operation, subjects remain separate but minimal linkages are established. In interdisciplinary operation, subjects are integrated around a specific theme or a problem (Drake & Burns, 2004). In transdisciplinary operation, “subjects are integrated around a broad theme. Issues such as poverty and violence in society lend themselves to this broadly integrative approach” (Miller, p.139). The Story Model (Drake et al., 1992) provides a framework for teachers and students to explore “the wicked problems” (Drake & Reid, 2021, p. 2) such as the issue of poverty at the transdisciplinary level.

Miller argues that holistic education focuses on relationships: “the relationship between linear thinking and intuition, the relationship between mind and body, the relationships among various domains of knowledge, the relationship between the individual and community, the relationship to the earth, and the relationship to our souls” (p. 89). To be more specific, the purpose of holistic education is to combat dichotomized or dualistic patterns (Loy, 1988; Robinson, 2020). To that end, Reciprocal Learning (Xu, 2017) is “a concept and an approach for international and cross-cultural teacher education and school education for bridging the West-East dichotomy by harmonizing Eastern learning and Western knowledge with mutual respect and appreciation” (Xu & Connelly, 2022, p. 5).

Miller’s monograph illustrates the utility of holistic education in reshaping people’s understanding of education and in rethinking the relationship between nature and people from different cultures. Khoo and Lin (2023) argue that people need to see themselves as Earth citizens to solve the issues that human being encountered rather than in a divided framework to spread hatred. To this end, Miller’s work on holistic education can illuminate curriculum reform, teacher training, and educational policy making.

Acknowledgement

We would like to express our appreciation to Ms. Xiaojun Kong for her insightful ideas and thoughtful discussions on the topic of holistic curriculum, which has enriched our understanding of this review.

References

- Drake, S. M., Bebbington, J., Laksman, S. et al. (1992). *Developing an integrated curriculum using the story model*. OISE Press.
- Drake, S. M., & Burns, R. C. (2004). *Meeting standards through integrated curriculum*. ASCD.
- Drake, S. M., & Reid, J. L. (2021). The Story Model Empowering students to design their future. *Education Canada*, 61(2), 1-8.
- Khoo, Y., & Lin, J. (2023). “Asia as method” as a quest of the spirit and finding we-togetherness: a collaborative autoethnography. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-023-09827-3>
- Loy, D. (1988). *Nonduality: A Study in comparative philosophy*. Humanities Press.
- Miller, J. P. (2019). *The holistic curriculum* (3rd ed.). University of Toronto Press.
- Miller, R. (1992). *What are schools for: Holistic education in American culture* (2nd ed.) Holistic Education Press.
- Morcom, L. A. (2017). Indigenous holistic education in philosophy and practice, with wampum as a case study. *Foro de Educación*, 15(23), 121-138. <https://doi.org/10.14516/fde>
- Robinson, H. (2020). Dualism. In N. Z. Edward. (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://stanford.library.sydney.edu.au/entries/dualism/#toc>
- White, L. (2022, March). “Momma, today we were Indian chiefs!” Pathways to Kan’nikonhrí: io† through Indigenous holistic education. *Frontiers in Education*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2022.699627>
- Xu, S. (2017). *Cross-cultural schooling experiences of Chinese immigrant families: In search of home in times of transition*. Springer.
- Xu, S., & Connelly, F. M. (2022). Reciprocal learning in teacher education between Canada and China in a globalized context. In I. Mentor (Ed.), *The Palgrave handbook of teacher education research* (pp. 1-30). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-59533-3_37-1