

## **The Spiritual Dimension in Holistic Education**

*Conference in Memory of Dr. Pille Valk "Spirituality and the Encounter with the 'Other'", Tartu/Estonia 10/11 September 2010*

### **Introduction**

Thank you for the invitation to take part in this important conference. Dr. Pille Valk was a spiritual person full of concern for the other and full of hope for making things better in life. This gave a lot of inspiration for everybody who met her, lived and worked together with her. Testimonies about this have been given during this conference.

The theme of our conference is well chosen: Spirituality and the encounter with the "Other". My contribution to the theme deals with a complex term in education philosophy: holistic education (HE). A special emphasis will be given to the spiritual dimension in HE that is a key element in most of the approaches of HE.

I will start in dealing with the question: What is HE? I will then say something about roots and wings, I will focus on the appreciation of spirituality in education and in the final part I will introduce three examples of HE approaches.

### **1. What is Holistic Education?**

Holistic education (HE) is a movement of different educational theories and praxis that strives for whole people in whole communities in a whole world.

Five characteristics can be mentioned: These are

- A critique of conventional education
- A specific way of reasoning and acting
- An appreciation of spirituality in education
- A multidimensional approach to truth
- A change from transmission to transformation as aim of education

*A critique of conventional education.* Knowledge and ways of knowing become increasingly fragmented in modern conventional education. There is more and more pressure from the economy and politics to prepare the labour force and citizens that fit into the needs of a globalized, economy dominated world. Employability, Mobility and Flexibility have become catch words of this development. Critique on existing curricula speak about an “unbalanced emphasis on economic and utilitarian aims, leading to an over-emphasis on school as a competitive market where the child is unable to flourish and grow as a person, or to be listened to” (Watson, 2006, 253). HE deals critically with the consequences of conventional education, such as fragmented knowledge, and supports developing a concept of interconnected knowledge.

*A specific way of reasoning and acting.* There is a long tradition of holistic thinking in the history of philosophy. Re-connecting to this tradition does not necessarily include devaluing the benefits of the Enlightenment and modernity, especially the ‘freedom to use one’s own intelligence’ (Immanuel Kant) or the critical ideas as the centrality of freedom, democracy and reason as primary values of society. To value the interconnectedness of life means to question critically the perspective that science is the most valid form of knowledge that dominates all other forms (Francis Bacon) and to question a mechanical and reductionist worldview (René Descartes) that dominates and neglects other dimensions of the human being. Emphasizing interconnectedness or the web of life (Capra, 1996, 2002) means to enlarge this view by the principles of interdependence, integrity and systemic thinking. It is not to follow an uncritical appreciation of the past, but developing a critical evaluative competence of the failures and limitations of the dominant scientific-mechanistic paradigm.

*An appreciation of spirituality in education.* A core element of HE is to appreciate spirituality as a key element of the human being. A common definition of spirituality is difficult because of the complexity of the term and its use. It has become an ubiquitous expression covering many different aspects of personal life and cultures. It is used in traditional religions, as well as in new religious movements and in non-religious spiritual groups. For educational purposes, the term spirituality needs to be broad enough to include a religious contribution, as well as acknowledging a spiritual dimension to living that covers values, commitments and aesthetic concerns.

*A multidimensional approach to truth.* The either/or thinking, the dualistic perception of reality is dominant in what we call the western thinking based on Aristotle’s logic and Descartes’ subject/object split. It is a common feature of HE

that it is based on the competence to think in a complementary way e.g. to combine a religious with a scientific world view. Instead of a binary logic of either-or, in many new sciences and movements a 'both-and' perspective has been developed. Helmut Reich (physicist and social scientist) has developed an empirical grounded theory of *Relational and Contextual Reasoning* as a way of possible thinking when one seeks to bring together two or more heterogeneous competing descriptions, explanations, models, theories of the very same entity (Reich, 2002). Reich's empirical studies show that we are able to connect two or more competing theories about the same phenomenon.

*A change from transmission to transformation.* Transformation is one of the major aims of holistic education. It is often used in opposition to transmission. Whereas transmission can mean to transmit knowledge from the one who knows (normally the teacher) to the one who lacks knowledge (normally the student) transformation refers to a common process of encounter and investigation of life-based issues and challenges.

In a pedagogical context the Dutch scholars Wardekker and Miedema (2001) use these terms to characterize two models of education.

In the transformative view of education, the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and of norms and values as modes of being, knowing, feeling and acting are not taken in the dualistic subject-object way but in a holistic or transactional way. Learning is aimed at the growing capacity or the growing competence of students to participate in culturally structured practice. The idea of dialogue and participation is fundamental. The core focus of the learning process is not the transmission of knowledge, skills, values and norms but rather the transformation of these into a heuristic base for acting.

Why holistic education? Elaine Riley-Taylor states, because "We are creatures of both reason and emotion, mind and body, matter and spirit" (2002, 67).

## **2. Roots and Wings**

Forbes (2003) presents an analysis of ideas and the nature of holistic education that refers to the philosophical underpinning of this approach to education. His profound examination of the ideas of holistic education goes back to the work of six 'Founding Authors': Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), Friedrich Wilhelm August Froebel (1782-1852), Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), Abraham Harold Maslow (1908-1970) and Carl Ransom Rogers (1902-1987). His thesis is that other holistic educators like Maria Montessori, Krishnamurti, Rudolf Steiner or Ivan Illich did not contribute decisively to the development of HE but relied on fundamentals that have been

already worked out by the Founding Authors. The first three of the list are educators that were well known for innovative approaches to education. The other three are more based in the field of psychology. C.G. Jung and Abraham Maslow were humanistic psychologists and Carl Rogers was an early developer of Transpersonal Psychology. Forbes argues for 'Ultimacy as the goal of education' and a central term for holistic education. It is worth going deeper into his line of thought to learn about the main idea he sees in holistic education.

He starts with **two formal meanings of the Ultimacy**:

1) Ultimacy the highest stage of being that a human can aspire to, either as a stage of development (e.g. enlightenment), as a moment of life that is the greatest but only rarely experienced by anyone (e.g. grace), or as a phase of life that is common in the population but usually rare in any particular individual's life (e.g. Maslow's peak-experience); and

2) Ultimacy a concern or engagement that is the greatest that a person can aspire to (e.g., being in service to something sacred). (2003, p.17). Ultimacy can be discussed in relation to views of human nature and also as an aspect of religiousness. In the first perspective Ultimacy is seen as the maximum development of those capacities that together make up a human being. This understanding supports also the process-oriented character of HE because, as well as holism, Ultimacy is a stage that can never been reached. In the second perspective Ultimacy is seen as an aspect of religiousness. Indeed, in many HE approaches there is the distinction between religiousness and religion, the need to get away from stated inadequacies of traditional religions and to promote religiousness, depending on a human potential and competence that can sense, experience, or perceive the divine. Many were more concerned 'with that which lies at the origins of all religions, and that which is in humans that is related to the divine, they made universal claims which they felt are beyond the limitations of time and place inherent in religions' (Forbes, 2003, p.24). In this sense HE often promotes what some have called "secular-religiousness" – 'secular' in that no religion is followed, but 'religious' in that what is 'sacred', or 'divine' or 'spiritual' is given great importance.

Friedrich Wilhelm August Froebel, the third Author in Forbes study, is well known as the founder of the kindergarten. 'His contention that early education lays the foundation for later education, and that education is the foundation for (...) social reform struck the popular chord' (Forbes, 2003, p.133) in the time following 1816 after the devastation of the Napoleonic wars in Germany. Froebel was the most theistic of the Authors with his nature-mysticism Christianity. For him ultimacy is the 'representation of the divine nature within' achieved through

unity which is 'the goal of all human history, individual and collective...' (quoted in Forbes, 2003, p.133).

Based on the approaches of the Authors it can be stated that spirituality in a broad and dynamic understanding is a basic principle of holistic education.

Consequently *Spirituality* should not be taken as an utterly mystical or other-world spirituality. There should be awareness of the different potentially conflicting spiritual traditions that range from an autonomous self-spirituality focused on shared human beliefs to spirituality that is the developing relationship of the individual, within community and tradition, to that which is of ultimate concern, ultimate value and ultimate truth.

### **3. Appreciation of spirituality in education**

Concerning spirituality, there is an overwhelming consensus amongst holistic educators that the integrated view on spirituality is what distinguishes HE most from other approaches to education.

Spirituality means generally an 'inner core' of every person that lies beyond the physical, social and other sources of personality named either in religious terms ('soul', 'the divine within') or in the language of depth psychology ('the higher self'). The concept of spirituality dominating in HE is close to Aldous Huxley's understanding of perennial philosophy (a term coined by the philosopher Leibniz; see Huxley, 1970). The term refers to the spiritual wisdom in the history of humanity, to the core of its religious and wisdom traditions in a non-dogmatic sense. "Spirituality is the realization that the individual is part of the whole; it is inherent beauty, truth, and all things unconditional. This experience brings about love, compassion, joy, humility, and interrelatedness. (...) Spirituality is the creative energy of the universe and the essence of holistic education' (Nava, 2001, p.39). In other words, spirituality is also a key for the interconnectedness of the human being with the community s/he lives in and the wider context. There is little argument in the HE movement that there cannot be an education of the whole child without this transcendent dimension in education. And this dimension is not just seen as an inner dimension. As John Hull has expressed "Spirituality (...) is not only to do with the 'Spirit' but with the physical well-being of the child" (Hull, 1998, p.59, quoted in Watson, 2006, 253).

The aim of a sensitized education for spirituality includes facilitating youngsters to learn how to think critically about the current socio-cultural situation and about spiritual and moral issues.

A glance about the ambitious aims of HE may be given by listing some book titles on HE: 'Caring for New Life' (Miller, 2000a); 'Educating the Soul' (Palmer, 1992, 1998); 'Nourishing Spirituality' (Riley-Taylor, 2004), 'Pedagogy of universal love' (Nava 2001)'Yearning for whole communities' (Oldenski & Carlson, 2002) and 'A journey for a more holistic understanding of education' (Palmer, 1993, 1998).

HE is not a monolithic term or a single approach to education but an umbrella term that covers different perspectives. It takes account of the fact that recent developments in physical science, systems theory, ecology, depth psychology and in philosophy have given new impulses to express 'the awesome wholeness of reality' (Ron Miller).

A holistic perspective means recognizing that no one view can take in the whole picture. Multiple and integrating perspectives are essential in the approach to knowledge.

### **Intervention: A Critique of HE**

HE has always provided emotionally loaded controversies. This is no surprise because conventional education, mainstream education, modern schooling are critically perceived and criticized sometimes in a very radical way. However HE does not exist in a different world. Even part of the HE movement claims that HE should include a critical analysis of existing inequality, racial and gender discrimination as a starting point for seeking alternatives. Ron Miller, in particular, has constantly argued for more dialogue and links between holism and other approaches:

Bridges need to be built between holism and critical theory, between holism and progressive social movements, between holism and 'reconceptualist' thinking and other so-called post-modern approaches. (...)We must learn to speak in languages others than our own, and to appreciate the value of other world-views (2000a, p.20-21).

### **4. Examples of educational approaches**

Three approaches will be presented as good examples of a holistic oriented perspective in education:

- Paulo Freire: Critical Dialogue
- Parker Palmer: Education as a spiritual journey
- Jacqueline Watson: Every Child Matters and participation

#### **Critical dialogue (Paulo Freire)**

Paulo Freire, Brazilian educator (1921-1997), has powerfully described the hidden power structures in education and schooling. In his method of alphabeti-

zation and central to his pedagogy, is the critical dialogue on an equal level between teachers and learners, to rename reality and to be able to transform reality. Some of his books became very popular all over the world: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, *Education for Critical Consciousness* and later on: *Pedagogy of Hope* and *Pedagogy of the Heart*. It is important to mention that Paulo Freire's approach does not stand for a specific method. Freire was always critical against any uncritical adaptation of his approach in a different context. He has always encouraged educators that they look at themselves as a man or a woman living and producing in a specific society. He invites learners to come out of the apathy and the conformism which is akin to being 'dismissed from life', as they often find themselves. Freire challenges them to understand that they are themselves the makers of culture. This has led him to an approach to enable learners to decode their reality, to find out about the general issues in their context aiming at social transformation.

Freire's broad and deep understanding of education, taking its political nature at the core of its concerns, has been shaped by the following main principles:

1) *Dialogue*: One of his main principles. Dialogue is changing teachers and learners. Teachers become teacher-learners and learners become learner-teachers. Raising questions together becomes more important than to share ready-made answers.

2) *Praxis* (oscillation of action and reflection). Freire's approach has been developed through praxis, action and reflection about action that leads to a further development of action etc.

3) *Conscientization*. The development of consciousness is the central focus of Freire's pedagogy. The learner is seen as a subject with active meaning-making capacities and the capacity to re-name his/her context. This brings in a radical political dimension in education; Freire was committed to pedagogy of liberation from inhuman living conditions.

4) *Lived experience* is more important than theoretical thinking.

5) *Christian sources* have influenced his approach but also other approaches and philosophies like phenomenology, Marxism, and concepts of social anthropology.

Freire speaks of 'teacher-learner and learner-teacher' to characterise a dialogue oriented pedagogy. Later he explored this as follows: 'The teacher learns through teaching, the learner teaches through learning.' Freire's book 'Pedagogy of Autonomy' (original 'Pedagogia da autonomia: saberes necessários à prática educativa', 1996) has been translated in the American version into 'Pedagogy of

Freedom' (Freire, 1998) and into German (Freire, 2008). In these books Freire focus on the situation of the teacher and their competences. Some of the features he argues for are:

- Knowing how to listen
- Openness to dialogue
- Caring for the students.

Freire closely connects teaching with learning ('there is no teaching without learning'), develops a critical view concerning information and facts ('teaching does not mean to transmit information') and encourages compassion of the teacher for his/her students. As virtues for teachers he underlines humility, tolerance and commitment.

### **Education as a spirituality journey (Parker Palmer)**

Parker J. Palmer works on issues in education, community, spirituality and social change and lives in Wisconsin, USA. He offers workshops, lectures and retreats, and is author of teacher formation programmes. His main concern is about the inner life of teachers and how to create communities of learning.

Palmer starts developing his approach from the pain experienced by many educators. He highlights the '**pain of disconnection**': the disconnection from colleagues, students and their hearts.

He states that the world of education is filled with 'broken paradoxes':

- We separate *head from heart*. Result: minds that do not know how to feel, and hearts that do not know how to think.
- We separate *facts from feelings*. Result: bloodless facts that make the world distant and remote, and ignorant emotions that reduce truth to how one feels today.
- We separate *theory from practice*. Result: theories that have little to do with life, and practice that is uninformed by understanding.
- We separate *teaching from learning*. Result: teachers who talk but do not listen, and students who listen but do not talk.' (Palmer, 1998, p.66).

If this is the situation teachers are dealing with, the task might then be: how do we develop paradoxical thinking? Paradoxical thinking means to embrace a view of the world in which opposites are joined, to celebrate differences and to try to see the world more integrated. An ongoing task might be: How do we overcome *either-or thinking* and create *both-and thinking*? How do we bring things together?

One of his first books, published in 1983, has the title: *To Know as We are Known. Education as a spiritual journey* (1993). It is this image of a journey that influences also his understanding of spirituality as a decisive element of teaching and learning. Palmer is critical against a spirituality of ends which wants to dictate the desirable outcomes of education in the life of the student.

It uses the spiritual tradition as a template against which the ideas, beliefs, and behaviours of the student are to be measured.' (...) Authentic spirituality does not dictate where we must go, but trusts that any path walked with integrity will take us to a place of knowledge. Such a spirituality encourages us to welcome diversity and conflict, to tolerate ambiguity, and to embrace paradox (1993, p.xi).

Palmer encourages us to look beyond modes of knowledge that are either inspired purely by curiosity or by a desire to control. He argues that another kind of knowledge is open to us, 'one that begins in a different passion and is drawn to other ends' (1998, p.8). This knowledge originates in compassion or love. The goal from knowledge arising from love is the re-unification and re-construction of broken selves and worlds. Palmer's guiding idea of teaching is to create a space where the '*community of truth*' is practised.

The *concept of the inner teacher* is used by Palmer to focus on the call to teach from within. He states that '(t)he teacher within is not the voice of conscience but of identity and integrity. It speaks not of what ought to be, but of what is real for us, of what is true' (1998, p.30f.). So a strong sense of personal identity should infuse the work of the teacher. 'Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves.' (1998, p.11)

### **Every Child Matters (Jacqueline Watson)**

Jacqueline Watson teaches at the Centre for Applied research in Education, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK. Her longer-term research interests are in spiritual development and religious education, and issues around children and young people's participation and voice. She has written a number of articles in the International Journal of Children's Spirituality. In 2006 she published a critical analysis of the programme "Every Child Matters" (ECM) a major change programme aimed at integrating all services for children and young people in England. ECM seeks to improve children's well-being in a comprehensive meaning including their right to a voice in decisions made about their care. Her analysis explores that ECM make no mention of children's *spiritual* well-being however at the heart of the ECM initiative are values which will resonate with children's spirituality: well-being,

holism, the whole child, and listening to the children's voice. She critically analyses a functionalist narrow use of spirituality in education.

“Spirituality (..) refers to the beliefs and values that human beings develop in response to the human condition. Yet this significant understanding of spirituality has been reduced to only an element of the broad secular conceptualization of spirituality that has been used for spiritual development in education in England since the 1988 and 1992 Education Acts” (p. 253)

For Watson the right of children and young people to have their voices heard and their concerns addressed is of high value. She makes a link between participation and the children's spiritual well-being and challenges the “spiritless pedagogy of the National Curriculum” in England and Wales. For her “Spiritual pedagogy must address the knowledge base and critical thinking needed for addressing the richer sense of spirituality” (p. 260) that is inherent in transcendent beliefs and values which give deepest meaning of life.

### **Perspectives /Summary**

The three approaches of Paulo Freire, Parker Palmer and Jacqueline Watson were developed in a different context and at different times. However they share some common perspectives.

#### *The role and the task of the teacher*

The first common perspective is a specific understanding of the role and the task of the teacher. For Palmer it is the image of the *inner teacher* that he uses to emphasise the need of identity and integrity of the teacher. According to Palmer the outward work of teachers is a projection of his/her inner condition. How teachers relate to the work they do, and how they relate to others through their work, hinges on how well they know and understand themselves. Furthermore, Parkers central tenet, ‘good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher’ (1998, p.10) includes a perspective that in any teacher training this dimension of self-reflectiveness should be given prominent attention.

While Paulo Freire's approach is shaped by a critical dialogue and an ‘action-reflection’ process of encoding reality, in his later work he focused more on the competences of the teacher. For him teachers should have the competence to listen, openness to dialogue and a commitment of caring for the students. Teachers should not be like ‘bankers’ who transmit knowledge to students but act as facilitators for learning including the readiness to constantly learn themselves.

Watson's concern is about the future attentiveness to children and young people's spirituality that has to do with real participation as well as with addressing a richer sense of spirituality to enable young people to become spiritually educated, informed, articulate and literate.

### *Teaching and learning*

In all three examples a critical perception of 'knowledge' is obvious and an appreciation of the active meaning-making capacity of all involved in a teaching-learning-process. Parker Palmer speaks of the 'community of truth' that enables teaching and learning in an open and dialogical way. It is like weaving a complex web of connections among the teachers themselves, their subjects, and their students to encourage them to learn to weave a world for themselves. They emphasise also the central role of the teacher to become a self-reflective learner herself and to appreciate the students in their teaching competence. The 'teaching task' then is not to transmit readymade answers but to encourage and facilitate a dialogue in a common search for possible contributions to existing problems and issues of life. 'Good teachers bring students into living communion with the subjects they teach,' says Parker Palmer. 'They also bring students into community with themselves and with each other.' (1993, p. xvii) Learning is both an inner process of self-discovery and a cooperative activity.

### *Education for transformation*

The presented examples have also in common the belief that education is a valuable instrument for transformation, that it can make things better. There lies a danger in this buzz word of transformation when it is linked with education. Definitely education is not the problem-solver of society however tempted many politicians are to mention this. But education can contribute to enable people to play an active role in a search for a better world, a world that is more whole and a little less fragmented.

I have brought with me a poem of Janusz Korczak, Polish doctor, poet and educator, director of a children's home who died with his children in the concentration camp of Treblinka in 1942 about Children's Rights:

You have the right to be respected like an adult.  
You have the right to be like you are  
You do not have to disguise yourself and be like adults want you to be  
You have the right of the present day, each day of your life belongs to you,  
to nobody else.  
You child, are not in the process to become a human being,  
you are a human being.

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Holistic education should cultivate all these aspects in full measure. For example, physical education should include not only the performance of physical exercises to keep the body fit, but also the training to use the senses and physical framework wisely. Finally, spiritual education should cultivate a refinement of the mind, to manifest that elusive "fourth dimension" of the human personality from which springs forth an intuitive understanding of the very purpose of our existence, and a clarity of what ought to be done to achieve it. It is quite clear that the modern educational system completely sidesteps the emotional and spiritual aspects of the human personality, and caters only to physical and intellectual growth-and this, too, only in a superficial manner. Holistic education is rooted in experiential learning and centers education on the relationships that people create with each other. [Learn More!](#) The Montessori school movement also placed emphasis on the spiritual qualities of the child and not just the intellectual aspect. Maria Montessori, founder of the Montessori movement, felt that people underwent a spiritual development that best occurred within a nurturing environment. The 20th century therefore saw several approaches to holistic education, though there was no single idea about how to implement it.

### Common Philosophies and Themes.

In many respects, holistic education may come across as fragmented in implementation. **HOLONS, HOLISM, AND HOLISTIC EDUCATION** Holistic learning theory reflects the latest findings from quantum physics as well as ancient ideas related to shamanism, Gnostic Christianity, and perennial philosophy. Holistic comes from the word "holon"™ which is a whole that is also a part. That is, each little part of the whole contains the whole within.