

## Holistic Education — A Personal Revolution

By Steven Taylor

*The most important kind of freedom is to be what you really are. You trade in your reality for a role. You trade in your sense for an act. You give up your ability to feel, and in exchange, put on a mask. There can't be any large-scale revolution until there's a personal revolution, on an individual level.*

–Jim Morrison, American poet and singer (1943-1971)

### ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the holistic approach inherent in unschooling, which takes learning outside of the restraints of mainstream education in order for each child to become the author of his or her own curriculum.

Although educators now advocate student-centered modifications to the school system, we still view people in schools as agents, factors or products of an indispensable institutional agenda. The latest research and revisions developed in the name of reform are still generated in the context of a system that is unable perceive its own inadequacies and so projects them onto others—students, teachers and parents. Inspired by the work of Paulo Freire (1972), I contend that students must realize the

pervasive oppression of schooling and gain power over themselves and their circumstances in order to become socially literate. These values of awareness, resistance and freedom involve going beyond reform to a genuine remaking of the learning environment in the spirit of holism.

## INTRODUCTION

In the last chapter of *The Holistic Curriculum* (2001) John P. Miller suggests that the answer to the “atomization of society and schools” (p. 179) lies in putting students in charge of their own education. Real growth and learning will be the inevitable consequence as long as the *student is* the curriculum. The student must be able to pursue what Noddings (1984) calls a “free, vigorous and happy immersion in his own projects” (in Miller, 2001, p. 179). These two views have informed this critical reflection on holistic learning.

My analysis of the readings focuses on Chapter 9, “Community Connections,” and is developed in three parts. First is the notion that we must be aware of the pervasive circumstances surrounding us in schools in order to take a truly holistic approach. Here I will point to Miller’s outline of Paulo Freire’s work (1972). I have appended an example from Ontario as well. Second, students must gain power over themselves and their

circumstances in order to learn holistically. This idea was informed by Miller's review of William Glasser (1986). And last, these values of awareness and freedom imply that we must go beyond *reform* and allow this individual power to *remake* the learning environment in the spirit of holism.

## SOCIAL LITERACY

For years, education was teacher-centered and much has been written recently of the healthy trend toward a student-centered approach. But we still tend to see children, teachers and parents, not in the holistic terms of self and soul, but in the limited framework of the school; they are defined as agents, factors or products of the institution. Just where is the "center" in student-centered education? This seeming reform has occurred *within* the school system's frame of reference. No matter how open educators are to fresh strategies and information, or however alert we may be to new experiences and behaviours regarding the potential of our students, we seem unable to perceive the overarching circumstances of the problem. All of this theory, reflection and data gathered in the spirit and process of reform is still generated in the *context* of a school system that is assumed to be essential. This assumption cannot be the premise for real change.

Miller (2001) refers to the work of Paulo Freire (1972) in his discussion of social literacy. Freire's approach is especially relevant to the example I will share from my own secondary school. Miller outlines Freire's notion of reform:

In the first stage, the *magical-conforming*, people do not recognize oppression and are passive....In the second stage, the *naïve-reforming*, people believe that all difficulties lie with the individual and do not look at system rules or norms. A teacher at this stage will blame himself or herself for problems he or she is having rather than connecting one's behavior to the surrounding context....In the third stage, the *critical-transforming*, the people realize that they must critique the institutions that govern their lives and collaborate to change those institutions. (p.145)

This clearly expresses the problem in our schools. More accurately, the problem is not *in* our schools, but rather, *is* the school itself. The institution cannot seem to perceive its own inadequacies and so projects them onto others—students, teachers and parents.

*Appendix A* is an excerpt from *The Humberview School Weekly Bulletin* for the week of February 16<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup>. It offers a story from a mother

about her son Doug's "disappearing motivation". I get the impression that our principal expected us to imagine how we might effectively accommodate this child by changing our practice or ourselves, thereby changing the boy. But the assumption is that the child or the teacher (or possibly the parent) is the problem. This is the naïve accommodation that Freire (1972) mentions above. Doug was "cute and enthusiastic" when he entered school. What happened then? In the third paragraph his mother details the symptoms of his failure: less time devoted to homework, a growing sense of boredom, and a futile, hopeless attitude. She herself claims to be at her "wit's end" and finishes by wondering why Doug is "negative about school" and why he "seems to care less and less". Here she reveals her assumption that school is a necessary condition of his success. In fact, his very rejection of it is seen as proof of his own inadequacy rather than the school's.

In the second paragraph of the story, Doug's mother outlines the possible reasons for his decline. They are listed as his "phase" of adolescence, his teachers, his peers and even his own physical health. Schooling itself is never considered. The only solution suggested by one of Doug's teachers is no solution at all: "When he realizes what it's going to take to get into college, he'll straighten up". And I'm sure that no one will

question the legitimacy of a college or university that demands its students be “straightened”.

However, if we simply take Doug’s point of view, we can recognize that the problem is the school itself. It is worth returning here to Freire (1972) and his idea of critical transformation, where people “realize that they must critique the institutions that govern their lives” (in Miller, 2001, p. 145). What happened to Doug’s original enthusiasm? Sadly, his refusal to place his passion and interests in his school was misunderstood as failure. Yet, a truly student-centered approach would allow his eagerness to serve his own learning, not the agenda of an institution. And if that end is not possible in the context of his school, there are other possibilities. He and his mother might consider free schools or even unschooling. Unfortunately, in Ontario there is only one free school option; the Beach School in Toronto offers children an opportunity to pursue self-directed learning and participate in the democratic governance of virtually all aspects of the school. Unschooling (not homeschooling) takes learning outside of the restraints of mainstream education altogether, where each child is the author of his or her own curriculum. Whatever his decision, Doug has a right to more. Alfie Kohn (1999), in his book *The Schools our Children Deserve*, underscores the importance of encouraging children to question the institutions that govern them. Kohn sees schools not “as places where cultural knowledge is transmitted in order to preserve important

institutions", but "as places where a new generation learns the skills and dispositions necessary to *evaluate* those institutions" (p. 116).

## IMPLEMENTATION

As Kohn suggests above, students like Doug need to learn the necessary attitudes to critically transform schools. They must take control of their curriculum, their circumstances and their *sel/ves* in order to learn and live holistically. William Glasser (1986) advocates this idea as well. Miller (2001) reviews Glasser's control theory in his chapter on "Community Connections":

It is the need to gain power that is central to control theory. If students don't feel that what they are doing in school is of any importance, they simply won't learn....The need for power is at the core of almost all school problems. (p. 138)

What implications will this power shift have for schools? If our students' need for power is the core problem, then perhaps their exercise of it will be the solution as well. When a student's control and unique learning path extends into the school environment it will meet many obstacles — each of which is an expression of the power of the institution. As Freire (1972) has indicated (cited in Miller, 2001), these "serious difficulties may be related

to the system procedures and norms that exist in the school" (p. 145).

Warnings about the risks and dire consequences of giving students personal choice and control over their learning should be understood as institutional resistance to change. At these crucial points, the self-determined learner will push the limits, break the rules and redefine the school in their own terms.

An example of this effect involves the issue of whether students learn better on their own or in teams. Glasser (1986) claims that in most classrooms, "each student works alone. He or she is told 'Keep your eyes on your own work; don't share; don't compare; don't talk; don't help'" (cited in Millar 2001, p. 139). In my school, if a student were given the power to question or abandon this strategy, she would be cautioned with the fact that these insular skills of silence, isolation and private thought will be essential for success on the final examination. Here then, is where power meets problem. Obviously the value of individual seatwork cannot be rationalized by resorting to the threat of an examination, which is often seatwork itself.

The self-determined learner must power through this problem too. After all, a final examination can be considered (Ricci, 2004) an unnecessary condition of a system that, for its own sake, perpetuates the



importance of keeping children in immobile silence. And if the examination is criticized (perhaps by someone like Doug, above), it will probably be defended by the threat of more requisite sitting and listening in college; or, perhaps by the reward of some day gaining a place among the quiet cubicles of a multinational machine.

## CONCLUSION

The holistic approach to education involves more than a naïve accommodation to the institutional demands of school. It addresses the whole child, the whole school, and the whole problem. Giving students freedom from institutional restraints may indeed create more obstacles, more problems. But when a child's heart and hope conflicts with our curriculum, we cannot leave them defeated. Our response to the disorder caused by their self-determination must be to offer them more freedom, not less. This will take us beyond reform within schools. It will be a remaking of school. And its healing power will radiate outwards from the child, reinventing her relationships to her teachers, her school, her community and ultimately her society.

I would like to end this reflection on a holistic note by leaving the reader to contemplate a poem by D. H Lawrence entitled, *Last lesson of afternoon* (Appendix B). Lawrence (1885-1930) is considered one of the

greatest figures in 20th-century English literature. Ironically, he (like Doug) did not excel in high school and, after dropping out, gained a clerkship in a local factory in 1905. It was during this time that a friend encouraged him to begin writing. Lawrence went on to gain a teaching certificate from University College, Nottingham; but, after a battle with pneumonia in 1911, he gave up high school for the second time, abandoning teaching for a career as a full-time author. Many of his most celebrated works explored the dehumanizing effects of modernity and industrialisation. It's interesting to consider what impact his experience in high schools may have had on his writing.

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## Appendix A

### **The Disappearing Motivation**

A Mom tells her story:

“When Doug [not his real name] first started school, he was so cute and enthusiastic. He couldn’t wait to get to class each day. He seemed to think so much of his teachers. He did very well academically, too. So did his friends from the neighbourhood.

“But about fifth and sixth grade, this began to change. I can remember other moms beginning to ask the same thing: ‘What happened? What changed?’ At about 11 or 12 years old, our kids began to care less and less about school. Some parents attribute it to adolescence. They lose interest in academic things, what with hormones, girls, and all. But I don't buy that totally. Others think it's the teachers in those grades. But Doug's teachers seem to have been terrific. I think there must be more to it. Still other parents attribute the problem to the peer group. It's just not 'cool' to care about school. But I don't know. Doug has always been pretty independent. I just can't figure it out. We even took him to the doctor for a physical exam to see if he's okay. He is.

“The interesting thing is that the transition was slow: less homework to do or less time devoted to doing homework, more frequent expressions of frustration with his teachers, a growing sense of boredom with the whole enterprise. No teacher ever complained about Doug. But, you know, he just seemed to give up on himself. He began to think it was futile—he just couldn’t do it. His grades slid gradually over a few years. He still isn’t failing exactly, but his grades are low. And he’s negative about school!

“At teacher conferences, they dismiss the problem. ‘He’s just going through a phase,’ they say. ‘He’ll get past it and his grades will return to the top. He’s such a smart boy.’

“When I ask them how they plan to motivate him in positive ways, they have no reply. All they say is, ‘When he realizes what it’s going to take to get into college, he’ll straighten up.’ But it may be too late by then. He’ll be so far behind.

“I’m at my wits end. What should I do?”

## Appendix B

## LAST LESSON OF AFTERNOON

When will the bell ring, and end this weariness?  
 How long have they tugged the leash, and strained apart,  
 My pack of unruly hounds! I cannot start  
 Them again on a quarry of knowledge they hate to hunt,  
 I can haul them and urge them no more.

No longer now can I endure the brunt  
 Of the books that lie out on the desks; a full threescore  
 Of several insults of blotted pages, and scrawl  
 Of slovenly work that they have offered me.  
 I am sick, and what on earth is the good of it all?  
 What good to them or me, I cannot see!

So, shall I take  
 My last dear fuel of life to heap on my soul  
 And kindle my will to a flame that shall consume  
 Their dross of indifference; and take the toll  
 Of their insults in punishment? — I will not! —

I will not waste my soul and my strength for this.  
 What do I care for all that they do amiss!  
 What is the point of this teaching of mine, and of this  
 Learning of theirs? It all goes down the same abyss.

What does it matter to me, if they can write  
 A description of a dog, or if they can't?  
 What is the point? To us both, it is all my aunt!  
 And yet I'm supposed to care, with all my might.

I do not, and will not; they won't and they don't; and that's all!  
 I shall keep my strength for myself; they can keep theirs as well.  
 Why should we beat our heads against the wall  
 Of each other? I shall sit and wait for the bell.

~DH Lawrence

