Krishnamurti and Holistic Education

by

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“The purpose of education is not to produce mere scholars, technicians and job hunters, but integrated men and women who are free of fear; for only between such human beings can there be enduring peace.” - J. Krishnamurti

These words written by Krishnamurti a half century ago still have relevance in today’s world. Given that so many of our leaders today argue that education should train individuals so they can compete in the global economy, Krishnamurti’s insights are worth exploring. The first part of this paper will briefly outline Krishnamurti’s life and then I will examine some of his principle ideas with regard to holistic education.

J. Krishnamurti’s life

Krishnamurti was born in India in 1895 where he was the eighth child born in a Bhramin family. His mother to whom he felt very close died when he was ten; after her death he relied on his younger brother, Nityanada, for guidance and support.

In 1909 at the age of 14 Krishnamurti was identified by one of the leaders of the Theosophical Society, Charles Leadbeater, as a potential spiritual leader. As a result Krishnamurti and his brother, Nitya were brought onto the society’s grounds in Madras India to be educated. Annie Besant, one of the leaders of the Theosophical movement became Krishnamurti’s guardian and in some ways a mother-like figure to him. Besant and Leadbeater felt that Krishnamurti was a messiah and this offended many people in the Theosophical movement. One of those who left the society around this time was Rudolf Steiner who formed the Anthroposophical movement and the Waldorf education. Krishnamurti and his brother were moved to England in 1912 where they stayed for ten years and were
educated there. They were pretty much kept in isolation in the English countryside and had little contact with the outside world.

Around 1922 he began speaking around the world and fulfilling the vision that the Theosophical society had for him. In 1925 his dear brother, Nitya died of tuberculosis, and his death affected Krishnamurti deeply. In 1929 he renounced his connection with the Theosophical society. He had become uncomfortable with his role as “messiah” and denied that his word should be taken as scripture. Krishnamurti was always critical of dogma and particularly dogmatic religion. In a statement in 1929 he said: “I maintain that truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by an sect.” (cited in Blau, 1995, p.85)

Krishnamurti still traveled and talked around the world. When he was in India he stayed at Vasanta Vihar which remains today the headquarters of the Krishnamurti Foundation. His talks became more and more concise without the rhetoric of the Theosophical years. This then was the pattern for the rest of his life; to teach about the “pathless land” and to encourage people seek freedom from conditioning. Krishnamurti was also interested in education and as a result schools began to spring up in India, England and the United States. One of the most famous is the school in Brockwood Park England which was started in 1969 and recently celebrated its 30th anniversary with a conference on holistic education.

Krishnamurti died in 1986. He published many books which are often based on his talks and dialogues.

**Education and the Significance of Life**

In my view Krishnamurti’s clearest statement on education is his book *Education and the Significance of Life* which was published in 1953. This book offers an approach to teaching and learning that is deeply holistic. The word
"holistic" was not in use when he wrote this book; instead Krishnamurti uses the word "integrated." Two other books on education by Krishnamurti are *Beginnings of Learning* (1978) and *On Education* (1974). These books contain talks and dialogues with students at the Brockwood Park School and the Rishi Valley School in India.

I would like now to turn to some of the central themes in Krishnamurti’s work that are so relevant to holistic education today.

**The Problem of Fragmentation.**

Krishnamurti (1953) felt that fragmentation was a central problem in modern life.

He stated:

> In our present civilization we have divided life into so many departments that education has very little meaning except in learning a particular technique or profession. Instead of awakening the integrated intelligence of the individual, education is encouraging him to conform to a pattern and so is hindering his comprehension of himself as a total process. To attempt to solve the many problems of existence at their respective levels, separated as they are into various categories, indicates an utter lack of comprehension. (p.12)

The problem of fragmentation and compartmentalization are still with us more than 50 years after he wrote these words. Our inability to see relationships and interconnectedness has led to our environmental woes. However, the horrendous condition of our air and water has forced us to examine the relationship between economic activity and the biosphere. In short, our environmental problems
have made us look at life from a more interdependent perspective. The problem of fragmentation has also stimulated holistic approaches to so many aspects of life today including education, health, and even politics (Williamson, 1997).

The fragmentation also lies within ourselves. Krishnamurti (1953) saw that education tends to focus almost solely on the intellect which manifests itself as "cunning minds caught up in explanations." (p.63) Today we still educate the head but ignore the body, soul, and spirit. In the Western world particularly there is deep separation between head and heart. Krishnamurti (1953) wrote that "we are all brains, and no heart" (p.78)

The Aims of Education

If the problem is fragmentation, what then should be the purpose of education? Krishnamurti (1953) stated: "The highest function of education is to bring about an integrated individual who is capable of dealing with life as a whole."(p.24) This ability to see life as whole involves what Krishnamurti calls intelligence. In his words "Intelligence is the capacity to perceive the essential that what is; and to awaken this capacity, in oneself and in others, is education." (p.14)

Perceiving what is means not being caught up in ideals or models that get in the way of being in the present moment. Thus education should not be embedded in ideology. Instead, its goal should be freedom where the individual is no longer confined by cultural conditioning but is genuinely a free and creative person. Again in Krishnamurti's (1953) words:

Education in the true sense is helping the individual to be mature and free, to flower greatly in love and goodness. That is what we should be interested in, and not in shaping the child according to some
idealistic pattern. (p.23)

Self-knowledge, or "awareness of one's total psychological process" was another important aim for Krishnamurti. He believed that the student should "observe and understand his own self-projected values" and the conditioning influences that have influenced the student. The student learns to see himself or herself clearly and his or her relationship to others and the surrounding environment.

Closely related to development of intelligence and self-knowledge is the realization of wisdom. For Krishnamurti (1953) "wisdom comes from the abnegation of self" (p.64) When we are rooted in competition and greed, the self dominates. When we let go of the notion of me and mine and abide in a love, wisdom arises naturally. Krishnamurti spoke frequently of the importance of love and compassion as he feels love and intelligence should be closely connected. He (1953) stated "to understand our responsibility, there must be love in our hearts, not mere learning and knowledge." (p.78) Finally, Krishnamurti felt that education should help shape a new set of values. It should not just reinforce conformity and competition that exist in society but help in the transformation where freedom, creativity, and peace are more deeply respected and experienced in daily life.

**Principles of Learning**

How can these goals be achieved? First, we have to give up the educator's obsession with technique. Krishnamurti (1953) stated: "Present-day education is a complete failure because it has over-emphasized technique. In over-emphasizing technique we destroy man." (p.18) His words still apply today, perhaps even more so. The present day obsession with accountability and standards is just another
form of deadening technique. Of course, educators must be accountable but the almost pathological emphasis on comparing tests scores between individuals, schools, and countries is actually interfering with the learning process. School has become a game where the emphasis is on teaching to the test. Alfie Kohn (1993) has done research in this area and this research indicates that the more we test students the less they learn. In the present environment fear tends to predominate rather than risk-taking which is one of the most important elements in significant learning.

Educational reform has also tended to emphasize technique with regard to curriculum and instruction. Unfortunately, even those who call themselves holistic educators can fall into this trap and advocate a particularly technique such as cooperative learning without linking the teaching technique to a larger context of holism. It should be noted that Krishnamurti felt that education should offer information and technical training but within the context of what he calls an "integrated outlook."

Krishnamurti was also critical of attempts to control children and to use rewards and punishments. The reason for this is straightforward as how can the student become truly free, if he or she has to function in an environment of compulsion? Instead of discipline and compulsion, there should be an atmosphere of mutual affection and respect. This sense of respect must start with the teacher's respect for the student which the student must sense and feel in the classroom. Mutual respect arises in atmosphere where there is no fear. In Krishnamurti's (1953) words:

The right kind of education must take into consideration this question of fear, because fear warps our whole outlook on life. To be without fear is the beginning of wisdom, and only the right kind of education
can bring about the freedom from fear in which alone there is deep and creative intelligence. (p.34)

When rewards and punishments are used, they undermine the development of intelligence. In an environment of rewards and punishments education becomes a game where students try to please the teacher. Krishnamurti pointed out that an education built on punishment and rewards supports a "social structure which is competitive, antagonistic and ruthless." (p.35) Alfie Kohn (1993) has done research in this area and his findings support Krishnamurti's insight. His research indicates that rewards and punishments including grades actually interfere with student learning. In short, the student learns more in an environment where there is not an emphasis on rewards and punishments. For example, Kohn cites several studies where students who were not rewarded with money or candy did better on tasks than those who were rewarded. (p.43) This finding held true for elementary school children as well university students. For example, in one study of high school students some students were rewarded for tasks related to memory and creativity and some were not. The students who were not rewarded performed significantly better on the tasks.

Krishnamurti felt the traditional religious education was problematic because it was based on fear and rewards. It also discouraged inquiry into the nature of things which is at the heart of true education. At one point he (1953) stated:

True religious education is to help the child to be intelligently aware, to discern for himself the temporary and the real, and to have a disinterested approach to life; and would it not have more meaning to begin each day at home or at school with a serious thought, or with a
reading that has depth and significance rather than mumble some oft-repeated words or phrases? (p.40)

Krishnamurti's vision of education is different than that of Rudolf Steiner who does recommend that the day begin with 'oft-repeated" words and phrases. Although I believe that Steiner and Krishnamurti shared the same aims for education-that is the development of the free and integrated person their approaches to pedagogy were quite different. Steiner outlined a very detailed curriculum for every stage of the child's development. Krishnamurti did not; instead, he outlined certain general principles for educators to follow. While Steiner had specific prescriptions for almost every aspect of life, Krishnamurti avoided such prescriptions because he felt it might result in some kind of inflexible dogma that undermines the freedom of the individual.

The School

Krishnamurti argued that schools should be small. Large institutions by their very nature cannot be responsive to the needs of children. Again his insights are supported by the research. This research indicates that in small schools students participate more in the life of the school and that students in small schools actually do better in areas such as writing, dramatics and music. (Barker and Gump, 1964; Wicker and Baird, 1969) Despite this research schools districts in North America over the past twenty years have tended to close small community-based schools and build larger institutions because they are supposedly more cost efficient. Yet there is also research which indicates that small schools can educate children at a lower cost. (Sher, 1977). For example in Vermont it was found that six of the top ten schools in percentage of graduates entering college were small schools (fewer than sixty in the graduating class) and that they were able to produce these results with
operating costs, on a per pupil basis, of $225 less than the large schools.

Krishnamurti also felt the classes should be small. There has been recognition of this fact by some educational reformers and as smaller class sizes have been mandated in various in North America jurisdictions (e.g. California) particularly at the primary level.

Another element that Krishnamurit felt was important is a committed staff. He argued that teachers should be enthusiastic in their work and care deeply about the students in the school. The staff should also work together as a whole which again is easier to do in a small school.

Krishnamurti suggested that teachers meet often as a whole group to make decisions. Decisions should not be made arbitrarily by the principal but by group consensus. The whole life of the teacher should also be addressed. If the teacher is having difficulties at home, Krishnamurti suggested that these problems can discussed at the group meetings so that some form of support can be provided to the teacher. Krishnamurti was sensitive to the problems of teachers and stated that no teacher should be overburdened since this will adversely affect the teacher's work.

He also suggested that students be involved in school governance. Krishnamurti argued that student council be formed that includes both teachers and students and deals with problems such as "discipline, cleanliness, and food". Students should actually supervise each other in these matters and thus learn self-government.

The Teacher

Krishnamurti realized that teachers need to be integrated if schools are to achieve the aims he has outlined. The task of the teacher is first to wake up and be aware of his or her own thoughts and feelings. Teachers should examine their own conditioning and its influences on their behavior.
I think another word that we could use here, even though Krishnamurti did not use the terms, is "mindfulness". To be mindful is to be present in the moment so that we can see clearly and not be lost in our thoughts, habits and projections. Krishnamurti (1974) often talked about the importance of attention:

When you pay attention, you see things much more clearly. You hear the bird singing much more distinctly. You differentiate between various sounds. When you look at a tree with a great deal of attention, you see the whole beauty of the tree. You see leaves, the branch, you see the wind playing with it. When you pay attention, you see extraordinarily clearly. . . . Attention is very important, in the class, as well as when you are outside, when you are eating, when you are walking. Attention is an extraordinary thing. (p. 16)

In my own work with teachers I introduce them to mindfulness in my classes. I encourage them to be mindful in their lives for just a few minutes each day when they are shaving, preparing a meal, washing the dishes or folding the laundry. It is usually easier to start with something simple and then apply the practice to more complex situations like the classroom.

One of the ways we can be mindful is to be aware of eye contact. Emerson in talking to teachers said "do not chide, do not snarl, but govern by the eye". Rachael Kessler (1991) has also written about the importance of eye contact in classrooms: "Eye contact is crucial. It establishes not only empowerment, but also connection and caring on an individual basis. Eye contact reflects confidence, and students respond to the inner strength of a teacher who is comfortable communicating this way." (p 9)

Mindfulness, or attention, can gradually transform a classroom into a softer space.
A teacher in one of my classes comments on the impact of being more mindful.

As a teacher, I have become more aware of my students and their feelings in the class. Instead of rushing through the day's events, I take the time to enjoy our day's experiences and opportune moments. The students have commented that I seem happier. I do tend to laugh more and I think it is because I am more aware, alert and "present", instead of thinking about what I still need to do. (Miller, 1995, p.22)

Mindfulness is a way then that we can bring Krishnamurti's vision into practice.

For Krishnamurti the teacher should also be open and vulnerable. Emerson (1990) once wrote about a preacher but I think we could apply his thoughts to teachers as well.

He had lived in vain. He had not one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commanded, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it. The capital secret of his profession, namely, to convert life into truth, he had not learned (p.116)

Vulnerability does not mean that teachers should continually be self-disclosing. It means, however, that when it seems appropriate teachers can share something of themselves. Below is a good example of this process by Rachael Kessler (1991)

One night during my first year of teaching there was a blazing fire in my community, the roads were closed, and I was unable to get home to my family. I was able to contact them and know that they were safe, but I
spent the night in town and came in to teach that morning. I felt so
disconnected, worried, confused, and disoriented that I knew I couldn't be
present without telling my students about the fire. I started the class by
asking for their help: "You kids have all grown up here in California with
fires, floods, earthquakes. This is new to me. How have you coped with
disasters in your life?" This class was a turning point for that group.
Previously reticent about their personal lives and feelings they jumped into
this one with gusto. My authentic need, my vulnerability and a very hot
topic had brought them to life. (p.13)

At appropriate moments then as teachers we can open ourselves to our students. In
these moments students begin to see us as human beings and not just as "teacher".

Krishnamurti also refers to spontaneity as an important element in teaching. He
states (1953) "Intelligence is the spontaneous perception which makes a man strong and
free."(p.103) Emerson held a similar view when he (1990) wrote: "All good
conversation, manners, and action, come from a spontaneity which forgets usages and
makes the moment great. Nature hates calculators; her methods are salutatory and
impulsive. . . .(p.237-8) I would add to Emerson's list of "conversation, manners and
action" education which has often been forced into rigid models including outcome-
based education where there is little opportunity for spontaneous action. Ideally there
should be a balance between planned action and the spontaneous.

The student's inner life thrives in a climate where spontaneity is present and it
withers in an environment which is overplanned and controlled. In education we give
room for the spontaneous when we talk of the "teachable moment." In the teachable
moment the teacher moves away from the lesson plan and follows his or her intuition in
working with the students. Kessler's exploring her feelings about the fire was a good
example of the teachable moment.
Krishnamurti believed that teaching is not just a job but a "way of life". In some way the teacher should feel called to the profession. The teacher feels deep satisfaction in being with children and in some manner assisting in their growth and development. Krishnamurti (1953) comments at one point: "One teaches because one wants the child to be rich inwardly." (p.113) How important this statement is still today, as in my view holistic teaching and learning must address the inner life of the child. In various ways the inner life the child should be nurtured rather than repressed as it is in most forms of education. This can be done through the sensitivity of the teacher, the arts, fostering a connection to the earth and using approaches such as meditation and visualization which actively nourish the inner life. I have developed these themes in other contexts. (Miller, 1996; Miller, 1999)

Finally, Krishnamurti stated (1953) that "truth comes into being when there is a complete cessation... When the mind is utterly still... it is silent,... then there is creation." Educators need then to be comfortable with silence. In my work with teachers, in two courses I require them to do meditation practice which can be viewed as cultivating silence to see more clearly into the mind. I am very open with regards to which form of meditation they use; I just insist that for 5 or 6 weeks they spend part of the day in silence. Often they are skeptical in the beginning and worry about doing it right. Yet I continue to be amazed how after a few weeks they settle into some type rhythm where they feel more comfortable with the silence. One student described her meditation experience this way:

"I concentrated on my breathing patterns and I slipped into my familiar stance. Little entered my mind. I was simply enjoying the sensations of peace and tranquility... I left the apartment and walked home. I noticed that I was humming and strolling with a light step. Children on their bicycles and little puppies in my path were making me smile. In this remote corner of the
world, all was calm. I realized after a while that I was mirroring the image of my surroundings and in a small way, it felt wonderful to be part of the serenity of life.

In essence, I felt that I have participated in an education of introspection, as well as, the experience of interconnectedness with other people, with surrounding nature, and the infinite universe. (Miller, 1994, pp. 29-30)

Krishnamurti was careful not to endorse any method or practice and referred to meditation more as self-awareness than as specific technique. I am not concerned with the particular technique that the person uses but more that the person bring awareness to what they are doing.

Krishnamurti schools

As mentioned earlier there are a few schools that have been founded on the principles described above. Below is a brief description of three of these schools.

*The Rajghat Besant School.* This school in Varansi, India is a residential coeducational school with about 350 students ranging in age from 6 to 18. The students reside in 12 different houses. There are about 50 teachers and half of these live in the houses as House –Parents. Besides the academic program there are also extra-curricular activities including sports, yoga, gymnastics, art, music, dance, gardening, and working with computers. The aims of the school include:

To help cultivate all aspects of the child—physical, intellectual, emotional and aesthetic with a holistic development of all the faculties.

To motivate children without punishment or reward and without encouraging
competition.
Not to condition the mind of the child in any belief, whether religious, social or cultural.
To encourage enquiry with an open mind, and a respect for dissent.
To inculcate a love of Nature and a respect for all life.

Exams are not used in grades 2 to 7; however they are given in the higher grades because they are required for admission to university.

Brockwood Park School. This secondary school which is about an hour’s drive from London, England has approximately 60 students aged 13 to 20. The classes are very small and the teacher-student ratio is about 1:5. There is a strong aesthetic flavor to the school which is housed in beautiful large building on 36 acres. Matthew Barnett (1999) reports that “painting, pottery, music and dance are strong and an aura of creative excitement permeates every corridor and classroom.” (p.36) Recently a new junior school:Inwoods has been established for young children ages 3 to 6 on the grounds. Most of the graduates from the Brockwood continue on to University or some form of post-secondary education. The goals of the school include:

to educate the whole human being;
to explore what freedom and responsibility are in relationship with other and in modern society;
to see the possibility of being free from self-centred action and inner conflict;
to discover one’s own talent and what right livelihood means;
to learn the proper care, use and exercise of the body;
to appreciate the natural world, seeing our place in it and responsibility for it;
to find the clarity that may come from having a sense of order and valuing silence.
**Oak Park School.** This school is located in Ojai, California about 90 miles north of Los Angeles. The campus includes 150 acres and a main building and an arts building. The school serves students from ages 3 to 18. There is a preschool which focuses on children’s play and nurturing their social and emotional development through art, storytelling, movement and outdoor activities. In the elementary school the student studies traditional subjects such as math, science, language arts and social studies as well as number of other subjects such as art, music, drama, play production, horticulture and cooking, computers, woodworking, library skills and physical education. Classes are small with approximately 15 students in each class.

The junior high and high school offer a balanced approach to learning. There is emphasis on traditional subjects such as English, math, science, social studies and foreign languages as well as an opportunity to reflect on oneself and his or her relationship to others. In the junior high there is an integrated approach to learning as well as an opportunity to travel to Mexico and the American Southwest. In the high school, besides the traditional subjects students study psychology, philosophy, culture, and interpersonal relations. The focus generally is on inquiry and an investigative approach to learning.

All the Krishnamurti schools have small classes and strive to integrate academic learning into a broader, more holistic framework. All the schools emphasize the opportunity for student inquiry into important issues—both personal and social.

**Conclusion**

What is the legacy of Krishnamurti with respect to education? As I have outlined in this paper he provides a powerful holistic vision for education that has influenced educators for the past half-century. He reminds us today that we should not be trapped by our conditioning but use our inherent awareness to free ourselves and our children. We have lived in a century of ideology—capitalism, socialism, communism, and now the
more eclectic ideologies of postmodernism. Education has also been rooted in ideology; the current one being the ideology of market driven education and accountability. Krishnamurti reminds us that the essential task of education is to nurture the development of free, integrated human beings. Of course, no one can totally overcome their conditioning but Krishnamurti calls on us to bring as much awareness and insight to the forces that are influencing us and our behavior.

One of the other major spiritual visionaries of this century was Rudolf Steiner who was much more prescriptive in his vision and the result has been the Waldorf school movement. There are approximately 800 Waldorf schools today which are all based to a large degree on Steiner's very specific suggestions regarding the school curriculum. Krishnamurti refrained from making such specific recommendations regarding the curriculum as he was more concerned with the general approach that the teachers and schools take in educating students.

I think both Krishnamurti and Steiner can help us shape an education that is genuinely life affirming and holistic. Much of the Waldorf curriculum and Steiner's visions of child development can provide a framework for the child's education. Yet Krishnamurti reminds us that we should not be dogmatic or doctrinaire in our education and unfortunately some Waldorf educators have become too narrow and rigid in their approach. Yet it should be noted that Waldorf education has so many more schools than the schools linked to Krishnamurti. I believe this is because Steiner provided detailed suggestions for the curriculum that teachers have found helpful. Some educators find Krishnamurti’s vision too broad without enough specificity to provide guidance with regard to curriculum and pedagogy.

Ultimately, I don't we think can ever rely solely on one person for our approach to education. The universe has given us many educational geniuses- Socrates, Froebel, Pestalozzi, Tolstoy, Montessori, Steiner and Krishnamurti. Although we may feel connected to one thinker or set of ideas, I believe we need to remember that ultimately
we should follow the teacher that exists within each one of us (Marshak, 1997). This teacher is the divine spark that lives within each human being and is the principal source for healing the planet and educating our children. Krishnamurti agreed with the Buddha that each of us must be lamp unto ourselves.

What then is the legacy of Krishnamurti with regard to Holistic Education?

- **Importance of Self-Awareness.** Krishnamurti’s goal for education is the development of the individual who is free from conditioning. His focus on freeing ourselves from conditioning provides both teachers and students with the important reminder that we must constantly be aware of what we bring to each situation and learning opportunity. Self –awareness includes an examination of the both the cultural conditioning as well as our own psychological conditioning.

- **Avoidance of dogmatism.** His reminder of the dangers of dogmatism and ideologies can help us as educators avoid becoming too rigid in our approach and behavior.

- **Development of Attention.** Krishnamurti keeps reminding us of the importance of approaching teaching and life itself with attention and not letting our minds become clouded with too many thoughts that prevent us from living in the present moment.

- **Central Role of Integration.** Finally, Krishnamurti asks us to view life holistically and to see things in their totality. In this regard he provided an important contribution to the development of holistic education. Krishnamurti wrote in 1953 “The highest function of education is to bring about an integrated individual who is capable of dealing with life as whole.” (p. 24). This goal and much of Krishnamurti’s work is still relevant to our work as holistic educators a half century later.

This paper is based on talk given at conference on Holistic Education at Brockwood Park School celebrating it’s 30\(^{th}\) anniversary in October 1999.
References


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