HOLISTIC EDUCATION:
IMPLEMENTING AND MAINTAINING A HOLISTIC TEACHING PRACTICE

By

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the Degree of master of Arts
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Abstract

This study examines the holistic pedagogical practices of experienced teachers in alternative public schools.

This study reviews holistic educational philosophy and ancient Eastern spirituality as they contribute to transformative learning. Feminist theory provides a framework for developing a holistic view of learning that embodies our full human potential. This research will share methods and strategies used to support developing a true awareness. It will provide functional and compassionate ways to implement holistic pedagogy. I will emphasize that teaching with acceptance and reverence for our human capacities will embed these values in students' learning.

The aim of this study is to contribute to contemporary visions of teaching by sharing experiences that are mindful of the mind-body connection. I wish to make the perceptions and approaches of teachers accessible and to inspire curiosity in others to extend their holistic beliefs into practice.
Acknowledgements

Bob Barton – My drama instructor, I thank you for your enthusiasm and insight. You provided for me the opportunity to feel internally inspired.

Jack Miller and Clive Beek – My professors, I deeply valued your knowledge, support, and expertise. Thank you for overseeing my study.

Lyla MacAulay – My partner, for your patience, thoughtfulness, and love, I am forever grateful. Thank you for your ongoing encouragement and belief in me.

Participants – I truly appreciate the time you took to sit with me and share your stories.

Friends – With deep appreciation, I am grateful for your support and guidance.

Students – Without my students I could never have written this study. I thank you all dearly.
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Background: The Black Hole and The White Hole

Two nights in a row, dreams. The topics: death and failure. On the second night, I was in the space of emptiness. Against a backdrop of grey haze, darkness swirled at my feet as I stood at the edge of a black hole. I woke with a sensation that was not fear. Instead I felt an unknowing that excited my curiosity. This black hole, a strange form of encouragement sat with me as I wrote my thesis.

The start of my academic career was based on learning to deal with failure. In grade one I refused to speak, always undermining my teacher’s encouraging attempts. My successful determination for avoidance was reciprocated with academic failure but at the time I did not understand their connection. At six years of age I began school ardently writing stories in my mind. I was sociable and happy but cautious of my teachers. By grade three evaluations marked my learning at low levels and my trepidation of oral participation and apprehension to creative writing was evident. I was quiet and amicable but when it came to work I was anxious and tentative. However, due to my teacher’s caring demeanor, I was passed onto grade four, at which time I did inevitably fail. The idea of repeating grade four was beyond understanding so I just watched it happen, like I decoded words in a book. The need for me, a nine year old, to question its implication appeared overwhelming. Looking back, I mostly remember watching and listening to what was happening around me.

Years later, past failures replay in my mind constantly making success an unexpected surprise. I remember my dream. Standing at the perimeter of the black hole looking in, I remember the feeling of defeat. I related this metaphor of meaning to my thesis and it compelled me to question, if I entered this darkness, how would I succeed? In developing my paper my fears were large as I dwelled on what would come from my voice? What was the new that I could create when it had already been said? Silently I contemplated; I thought about a concept decomposed into fragments of structured thoughts and feelings that broke down even further into organized groups of words, measured and timed until they disintegrated into letters.
and periods, and even smaller into quarks of energy and I saw nothing but emptiness.

However it was the emptiness my curiosity wanted to dive into and so I believed I must have something to write. The reverse of the black hole is a white hole. Described by physicists like Stephan Hawking it is what things come out of (1993, p.154). This black hole I dreamt of had another side and I figured to get through it I would have to work with my fear. I imagined in the space of a word just the emptiness I needed. A space offering me only room to create, a place for learning, growth and transformation. I worked with my experiences to create new ones. I wanted to actualize my choices to sustain a wave of meaning. A wave of meaning I hope an audience will continue to sustain.

My thesis is about holistic education.

**From Margin To Centre**

How I came to study holistic education began with my undergrad. I was a graduate of Woman’s Studies. I left university with the question of what do I do with this feminist understanding? I studied feminist theorists who set in motion a need for me to use a new set of lenses when looking at the interrelations between people and their communities. Through critical analysis of lesbian identity politics I examined the existing patriarchal hierarchy that forced specific communities into the margins and delegitimized their worth. Author bell hooks, in her preface to the first edition of “Feminist Theory: From Margin To Centre” wrote,

*Living as we did – on the edge – we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the centre as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and centre. Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and centre and an ongoing private acknowledgement that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole (2000, XVI).*
bell hooks examines issues within feminist theory and analyses how the patriarchal hierarchical system of Western culture impacts one’s identity from a personal to a societal level. Authors of feminist theory, such as hooks encouraged me to question my own perception and to be open to other perspectives and for the first time as a young adult I truly began to see differently. Thinking in this way was pivotal for me as a teacher because it influenced my philosophy and pedagogical approach. Careful reflection and constant questioning was tiring but necessary if I wanted my teaching to be as relevant as possible. In my questioning of assumptions (which is never enough) I realized how often I relinquished to upholding the status quo.

As I continued teaching I could see more clearly how my students and I were engaged in a political construct of imbalance in which we struggled to manage. It was discouraging for me because my teaching was not effectively addressing the disparities. I wanted to honour the experience and voices of my students as much as possible and I wanted the communication between us to feel more alive. From our interactions, I felt a deficit that could not be overcome by solely relying on the traditional curriculum expectations or this political perspective. I believed much of what we needed was still missing and my concern led me on a journey to find out what that element was and how I could provide it.

**Meditation**

Soon after my entry into teaching, my feminist perspective dovetailed with a contemplative spiritual practice. I was brought up in a working – middle class, religious family. While finishing university, I left my Baptist roots for something different. Early on I resisted the idea of meditation until I was introduced to the Transformational Arts College. Here I participated in courses with people who articulated a similar outlook to mine and it was incredibly inspiring to have my beliefs acknowledged. This spiritual connection is what had been missing in me and I strongly felt the need to rekindle it. I knew exactly then that this was the form of nourishment to better myself as a teacher.
Deepening my spiritual understanding was critical for my professional disposition because through meditation my body and mind learned to slow down, feel calm and be in ease together. Regularly in the mornings I sat in a yoga posture for a five-minute duration that grew up to 30 minutes. By closing my eyes and slowing my breath I eased into a place of calm. With my muscles relaxing, I practiced letting go of thoughts and visualized a light of peace. Through continuous practice I have learned to sustain rhythm, to be accepting, and to read the subtle communicative responses between my body and mind.

This practice was and is important because it taught me how to be more mindful in my decision-making. This coupled with readings on Buddhism and mindfulness has really shown me the value and need for creating and supporting empathetic connections. For me as a teacher during times of confusion, frustration, or disagreement, levels of calm and compassion deplete. I found when facing opposition, the student teacher connection was severed and lack of understanding urged my will to assert authority. Reflection on these conflicting situations taught me how to read my body more closely and to read students’ expressions more closely. It taught me the importance of seeking awareness by letting go of who I am to openly see someone else. It taught me a response made with reflection is a more compassionate response. And so I continue with my daily practice of meditation.

Listening Honestly

My pedagogical approach to teaching is based on my professional background of study, personal experience, political perspective, and spiritual belief. My holistic focus grew from the understanding that these elements had to be blended if I was going to listen to the whole student and effectively guide him or her. I learned through exploration that a holistic approach was not solely based on the type of strategies or tools used; it was also based on how they were used. My job was to integrate strategies regarded typically as traditional with those regarded as creative in ways with students that would open their eyes to greater seeing. When I was truly connected with students their greater seeing would transcend through
both of us. And I love these moments! This is where meditation becomes helpful because at times I could follow a plan but at other times I had to intuit my subsequent actions. Below I share an experience that demonstrates how I worked with my intuitive and reflective abilities.

Tyrelle was a vibrant adolescent who enjoyed school and completed his work to the best of his ability. He was sociable but his moodiness made it difficult for him to create stable friendships and at times he was resistant to the leadership of his teachers. His athletic abilities were strong which made him a reliable member for team sports. On a day that I was administering a CASI (Comprehension, Attitude, Strategies, and Interests) reading assessment he was away with his peers at a hockey tournament. During lunch hour, I prepared a package for him and his classmate. It was to be completed in the afternoon at the library under the supervision of our educational assistant, Gail. After the boys returned and shared their morning events with the class I gave them their materials and explained the instructions. Hesitantly they walked to the library. Twenty minutes later Tyrelle returned with a crumpled paper that he tossed into the recycling as he walked in the door. Gail followed. She relayed to me his refusal to complete the task.

The CASI assessment is a standardized test that our school administers and I needed his results by the end of the week. I called Tyrelle over to inquire about the problem and sought to remedy it. Already I had an idea of what his setback was but I was also aware of my dilemma. I was expected to comply with the demands of my administration and thus my needs would push for his compliance in return. Tyrelle met my response with a confirmed NO. He was unwilling to back down and his glare was daring. He expected a match and I was prepared for one myself. I could feel my heart begin racing. A confrontation could have followed but begrudgingly I leaned back on my desk and took a minute. Tyrelle waited while I pondered what I knew on a gut level. He returned from his game wanting the companionship of his peers. He needed to settle into his desk and go with the flow of the class, slip back into routine like he was never gone. He did not want to return from a lively game into the shock of being isolated and anxious in a test situation he was not mentally prepared for.
This, through his rejection, is more likely what he was trying to tell me. Remaining neutral I refrained from overpowering his defiance. To be honest, I felt like my role as a teacher was compromised; yet on the other hand, it felt rightfully suitable.

The next morning after I reviewed their work, I had the students reflect on their response to the first question, which was based on the skill of summarizing. Tyrelle, empty-handed, sat at his desk quietly listening. As a class, we stated the expectations of a good summary and then in partners they exchanged their responses and read one another’s. They were asked to identify one strategy that their peer used successfully and articulate that to them. As students shared their opinions Tyrelle became agitated. Eventually during the period of sharing he got up from his desk and rummaged through the recycling. I watched him and my gut told me not to stop him. Thank goodness it hadn’t been emptied! He returned to his seat and peeled up unfolding his paper from yesterday to reveal a line and a half of writing. While the others worked he looked at me waiting. I walked over and read it. I brought my pen out but before I checked it I met his eyes and asked, “What was the message in the story, Tyrelle”? Not looking away he said, “Not to give up”. I repeated his statement emphasizing the *not*. Ironically the message fit our situation. He confirmed with his eyes that he got the meaning. He smiled turning away and I gave him a checkmark.

The impact of these results created much deeper learning than they would have had I enforced the dominance of my position. Forcing him to write would have only widened the gap between us. But by listening to his voice and responding reflectively there was learning for both of us. The underlying message of the story may not have been printed but it was felt with Tyrelle’s whole being. It was during moments like these I could feel myself abandoning the strict need to follow a system of expectation and evaluation and instead embrace something more human.
CHAPTER 1

Methodology:

Overview of thesis

The Board of Education in partnership with the government outlines a detailed vision informing the general public of their goals. “The Ministry of Education strives to promote a strong, vibrant, publicly funded education system that is focused on three goals: high levels of student achievement, reduced gaps in student achievement and high levels of public confidence.” Their vision states, “Ontario students will receive the best publicly funded education in the world, measured by high levels of achievement and engagement for all students. Successful learning outcomes will give all students the skills, knowledge and opportunities to attain their potential, to pursue lifelong learning...” (2011). Enfolded in the vision that insists educators commitment to creating the ‘world’s best education system,’ is the underlying belief that the Ministry will ensure successful teaching and learning. The Board and Ministry together monitor student achievement through test scores and the government monitors success through a strengthening economy. Therefore, the way one’s academic success can be measured is to assess how accomplished one is in the job force. This political partnership seeks national and international recognition. Based on a competition-through-comparison model, standardized forms of assessment, like the EQAO (Education Quality and Accountability Office), have been created by the Ministry to assume accurate measurements that will depict trends in learning. The results will inform teachers about how their existing practice can change in order to maintain high standards of achievement. However, the drawback to high stakes standardized testing is that the results do not accurately reflect students’ identity and ability. By separating the whole experience of learning into parts, product becomes isolated from process. The problem with this equation is that judging product on its own diminishes the value of process. Product and process inform each other and a student’s identity and ability are
intricately bound within this connection. A student’s status measured using a competitive and comparative model is discriminatory and undermines their self worth.

Standardized tests, comprehension tests, culminating tasks and report cards demonstrate a particular academic learning style that encompasses a specific skill set. These skills are deemed necessary for meeting the success criteria of an assignment and are therefore of higher value when compared to the other skills. Abilities outside of this academic range of skills are substandard and rated as below average. A below average rating has a detrimental impact for both students and teachers. Students are deemed underachieving and in need of improvement and teachers quality of practice can be considered underrated. Educational pedagogy that emphasizes one set of skills over another demotes the natural learning experience. Evaluation in this manner assumes a hegemonic existence that neglects the cultural, social and economic diversity of students inclusive of gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity and ability. The habitual experiences of students nurture both their academic and intrapersonal abilities as learners. Consequentially, due to the ranking of our national and international educational status, teachers lean toward using traditional academic methods that often overlook the diversity and severity of students’ needs. This form of neglect brings into question the success of a board-wide vision when the intension linking micro success to macro success is based on a money-oriented and oppressive form of governing. Through organized evaluation inequity is perpetuated and thus makes dubious the connection between quantified grades and quality learning.

In my examination of the Board of Education’s vision I acknowledge a recent shift in focus that highlights the role of student processing. The public school system has implemented new initiatives such as 1. Character Education, which is about character development and looking positively at human qualities and societal values. 2. Differentiated Instruction, which is about matching the readiness, level, and ability of the students learning to a task and meeting their individual needs and
3. A report card amendment, which was a change made to emphasize the learning skills comments in the report card. Although, these teaching efforts are in aim to consider the whole child, the priority still remains placed on teacher accountability and standardized testing. For more than a decade accountability and assessment have been at the forefront of public school education underlying the direction of its services. While the debate over the pros and cons of these initiatives continues, the Director of Education made another addition. He authorized the opening of new alternative schools that mandate a holistic approach to teaching. Schools with this focus are usually in the private domain of education; very few are publicly funded. For my study, it is this latter initiative that I will be focusing on.

Key to implementing a practice from a holistic focus is that it ultimately questions the purpose of maintaining a standard view of learning. Since it is based on augmenting connections issues around power dynamics are exposed as unjust. When standardized testing combines with differentiated instruction and academic development combines with character development, the finite combines with the infinite and the structured with the creative. Finding common ground between these opposites serves great potential but it is difficult because of a politicized power dynamic that keeps them in polarity. Decision-making that diverts from routine can feel confusing and unsettling under the daunting pressure of proving accountability. As teachers pair together interactive, creative, and open ended strategies with independent, structured and formulated strategies a noticeable discrepancy emerges between acquiring knowledge and testing one’s knowledge. In this manner the two do not support one another. Emphasis on outcomes clearly defined by numerical results is a large deterrent to whole child learning.

As was stated in the Ministry’s vision, students need opportunities to achieve success and to work with a community to ensure good outcomes and this is in alignment with holistic thinking. Learning occurs through interactions within relationships rich in guidance, care and openness, and to assume control over it demonstrates a fear and lack of trust for the process. Students who are marginalized in the classroom are the reason why it is essential for The Board of Education and
extending communities to rethink the meaning of a ‘good outcome’. Pedagogy that does not value our human potentials in the process of learning creates a divide within us where we silence, ignore, and devalue parts of ourselves. Teaching and learning encompass one another and to learn as people we learn with our whole being. We seek to learn and we do learn whether it be at different levels of readiness, different paces or in different ways. The time is now for us, as a society of people, to trust in our natural ability to learn.

Viewing learning through a lens that recognizes the significance of relationships changes the focus for teaching. Holistic education as Jack Miller says, is about balance, inclusion and connection (2007, p. 14).

Qualitative Research

The qualitative approach to my inquiry on the phenomena of holistic education will be phenomenology. “Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences. ...[it] is keenly interested in the significant world of the human being” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9). The overall goal of my work is to examine holistic education using a three-pronged process that involves the reading of literature, interviewing a small group of skilled teachers and reflecting on personal experience. I will apply a narrative component to my writing in order to describe the experience of the participants as fully as I can, to get at “the essence of lived experience” (Rossman, 2003, p. 97). As Van Manen and others of phenomenology believe the essence of a phenomenon is “…that which makes a some – “thing” what it is…” (1990, p. 10).

In order to get at the “universal essence” authors of phenomenology emphasize the need for rich description in writing. Through the interpretation of language and thoughtful reflection individual and shared meaning can be found (Van Manen, 1990, Creswell, 2007, Patton, 2002). The purpose of this exploration is to describe holistic education and to describe how the participants as well as myself perceive holistic education. Using a narrative style I will express how they interpret
their experience, their internal and external influences that led to change, obstacles they have overcome, supports they have been provided with, and their ability to maintain fortitude within. In the analysis of their accounts I want to examine their perceptions of what teaching with a holistic perspective looks like, how it is unfolding at this time in their careers. The authenticity of my interpretation will rely on the participant’s verification of transcribed notes, commonalities found between the different experiences, and the relationship of text to experience.

I chose this qualitative approach over others because I’m endeavoring to share one’s experience at a point in time in life. As Van Manen wrote, “What we must do is discover what lies at the ontological core of our being. So that in the words, … we find “memories” that paradoxically we never thought or felt before” (1990, p.13). I am striving for discovery, greater awareness, experiential understanding to the greatest degree possible. My wish is for the reader to reflect and question and if he or she discovers a meaningful connection I hope they expand their awareness.

A qualitative approach such as grounded theory uses systematic procedures for collection and analysis of data to generate a theoretical framework (Denzin, 2000, p. 373). In my study I am not creating a theory. I want to show through the narrative accounts of my participants an alternative view to teaching. More specifically, I want to show how their holistic perspective influences their pedagogical approach.

Ethnography is another form of research that happens in the field. It is about collecting extensive research on an entire cultural group. The participants are interactive overtime within a specific community or program and they learn and share patterns of values, language and behaviour. My research will differ from this, as I will not be engaging in fieldwork. Secondly, the participants have not all interacted over a period of time in the same school or program. They did not undergo the same professional development and are not exposed to learning or sharing the same patterns of values, beliefs, language or behaviour. They are located in different areas of the city, where the school cultures vary due to the diversity of
the surrounding communities. Thirdly, they are working with a holistic view as it is developing within their experiential understanding. A holistic perspective is not bound by a set of rules; it is an outlook that is fluid, open and creative as much as it is structured. Their unique accounts are insightful and will share likeness but also reveal differences.

The theoretical lens that I will use to view this study through is feminist theory. I will look at the inequities of a cultural system that is defined by the binary qualities of masculinity and femininity (also taking into account race, class, and sexuality). I will discuss how a patriarchal hierarchy creates this power imbalance and negatively impacts on the organization of Western public education. The inquiry will be written with a holistic point of view and Buddhist philosophy will be studied to reveal how the inclusion of its wisdom within contemporary education can support a more equitable and balanced approach to learning and living.

**Assumptions**

At the start of my thesis I shared a personal narrative to help situate myself within my research. My identity as a white female, who is spiritual, lesbian and a working-middle class educator comes with its set of assumptions. In awareness of these assumptions I question my subjective feelings through reflection in order to get at the truer picture of what I see. Creswell refers to Moustakas approach to phenomenological research when discussing Husserl’s concept of epoche or bracketing. Creswell writes: “...investigators set aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomena under examination” (2007, p. 59). There are challenges to suspending ingrained patterns of behaviour because in the act of this, one has to set aside their personality, their natural ways of thinking and feeling. This process requires that I the researcher be open and willing to question my own ideals. Looking through the lens of someone who is male, and/or of a different race, class, or religious denomination will likely present a different interpretation in comparison. Within the distinction of our identities some readers may share a common view or feel contrary to what I write as the author.
Beyond the assumptions of our identity, I hope we can aspire to reach the quintessence of holistic education. It will be exciting for me if what I write inspires even a little inquiry, discussion, reflection or contemplation from you the reader.

**Research Design**

I will be focusing on the experiences of four participants who have been teaching for at least six years at the elementary level and are currently working with a public school board within Ontario. The candidates all work at a school with a mandate that addresses holistic education. I began recruiting for participants at holistic workshops held at OISE. I attended these workshops regularly and felt it was the best place to begin searching because educators who attended showed a keen interest in holistic teaching. After sessions I handed out flyers and spoke to people who expressed interest. During conversation, some suggested another person they thought would also be interested. So from word of mouth, I sought permission to pass on information regarding my study to the third party.

An interesting point to note was that all candidates happened to be female and this was not intentional on my part as a researcher. While I was recruiting I did not receive a direct link to a male teacher as a possible candidate. This brought up a question concerning diversity. All participants were white women and in a similar age and class bracket. As a researcher I did not actively seek diversity amongst the identities of my participants. My focus was directed towards their experience: 1) how long had they been teaching because I did not want a recent teacher who was in the probation period; 2) did they have some background knowledge of holistic teaching because I wanted to know how this awareness would come through in their methods. Looking at the make up of my participants as a group, one could consider are white women more likely to be exploring holistic education and if so, why? The participant’s commonalities are not mentioned to simplify the diversity that comes from their experiences. My study is reflective of a few select teachers who are implementing a holistic approach but an extension could be to seek
candidates from diverse backgrounds and explore the concept of holistic education from their perspective.

Before the interview process began, I screened the candidates by providing them with a questionnaire. I was looking for volunteers that had more than two years of teaching experience with either the private or public school boards. I also enquired through the questionnaire about their basic understanding of holistic education and if they had attended some professional development that encompassed this view. I was searching for teachers whose previous experience linked in purpose to their current endeavors. Relevant to my report was that they were already exercising a holistic philosophy through their pedagogical approach and that they had the language to identify and describe their efforts. I wanted them to have a background of experiential knowledge to recall from and reflect on so that I could demonstrate how they worked through differences. To get at the essence of holistic phenomena I wanted to be able to synthesize and draw connections from their personal anecdotes.

I also selected these participants because they did not work in isolation. They taught in a school with a holistic mandate, with colleagues who shared this vision and alongside supportive parents from the greater community. I wanted to see if and how sharing common interests within a larger community supported teachers in sustaining the implementation of their initiatives. I was also interested in gleaning from their depictions how connections impacted their learning.

The teachers were also selected based on their willingness to participate. My hope was that the motivation to express their opinions would channel open and genuine sharing that outlined a progression of successes and shortcomings encountered on their journey.

The interview session was held off site at a location chosen by the candidate and was recorded for reasons regarding confidentiality. This decision was made to avoid any ethical concerns or discomfort that might arise from conducting an interview at their worksite. My thesis is focused on the teacher’s view and does not
include personal perspectives from administration, students or parents. I wanted to minimize any pressure from the immediate work environment that might influence the participant’s response. The interview focused on such themes covering holistic perceptions, pedagogical methods for teaching and assessing, and supports and challenges experienced within educational institutions. I began the face-to-face interview by re-introducing myself and explaining the central purpose of the study. I explained what would take place during the interview and what the data collection process would entail. They filled out the questionnaire, we discussed confidentiality and a consent form was signed, contact information was provided, and I answered any questions they had regarding the interview process and my work. They were aware that the interview would be recorded and they had the right to stop the interview at any time, as well as the right to withdraw from the study at any time. I expressed that their interview would be transcribed and I would report back to them so they could review the notes. At this time of review I as the researcher may need to ask questions for clarification. Upon agreement the interview commenced and finished with expressed gratitude.

**Research Question**

Jack Miller, a professor at the Ontario Institute in Education, describes holistic education as a series of relationships. “The relationship between linear thinking and intuition, the relationship between mind and body, the relationship between various domains of knowledge, the relationship between the individual and community, the relationship to the earth, and our relationship to our souls” (2007, p. 13). The focus of holistic education is about the connections between the integrated parts of the whole. In a conventionally structured education system within Western culture, how can teachers implement and maintain a holistic philosophy, a pedagogy that can be developed to educate the whole child?

**Interview Questions:**

Can you tell me about your school?
What attracted you to working at this type of school?

What is involved with teaching from a holistic perspective? Can you tell me about ideas, strategies, and methods that you use in your lesson?

Can you describe your holistic perspective?

When you are teaching a lesson, how flexible or spontaneous are you with the delivery of it?

What inspired you to teach in this way?

How do you (in connection with school and colleagues) tackle the issue of assessment and evaluation?

What supports do you have in place from administration, colleagues, and parents?

What obstacles do you experience?

Personally, what do you do to help foster your perspective?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Data was collected in the form of an interview, and personal note taking. My aim was to show what holistic education looks like, sounds like, and feels like both personally and professionally for the participating teacher. Thorough analysis of this collected information was combined with an in-depth study of research on holistic pedagogy. What I hope to gain as the researcher are new insights that will engage me in further contemplation and deepen my perspective regarding holistic learning on both personal and professional levels. I am honoured and grateful to be able to share the stories of others, to give their experience a voice that a community of readers can join with. With the completion of this project I look forward to seeing how my own perspective shifts in my teaching practice and new directions I may move in. I hope the participants also feel strengthened from the process of sharing their knowledge and experience with other educators and from this, gain insight that will further deepen their understanding and refine their outlook.
CHAPTER 2

Literature Review:

To think I don’t know. To walk into work, open the classroom door, write the date on the board and prepare to greet students knowing I don’t know. To listen, observe and interact with students knowing I don’t know. To trust I don’t know is to know I will fail. To accept as a teacher I have nothing for students. I have no claim to knowledge, no claim to being right. Defenseless, I am humbled. Before students, stripped of face, a teacher in name only. Here in the “I don’t know” without weapons to control, manipulate, or violate, am I safe without a shield? Without the proof of ability or talent to show my existence … is it safe to only receive? Safe with no face is the readiness to think, to feel and to be in learning. To learn is the offering that provides teaching. Socrates said, “I know that I know nothing”. To live is to embark on a path of unknowing, to exist only in the existence of others through interactions that evolve in willingness. A teacher in name only is quintessentially a learner, a student.

The interesting statement made by Socrates, “I can’t teach anything, I can only make them think”, can be confusing for educators. Does this suggest there is no teaching in teaching? For a teacher to imagine their proficient self as erased and incapable of imparting knowledge is perplexing, discrediting, and merely impossible. It defies educational training. The Board of Education at the elementary level maintains a view contrary to this, asserting that accountability demonstrates professional merit. Their view regards knowledge attainment as a linear process of achievement whereby the “all-knowing” teacher delivers standardized curriculum to expectant students. Pedagogy is implemented with an assumed outcome of excellence as its focus. However various theories based in holism, feminism, and critical pedagogy have exposed the shortcomings of this conviction by critically examining the purpose of academia. Theorists have questioned the traditional idea of learning and the authenticity of an educative system that is meant to justly support the wellbeing and evolving needs of humanity. Prominent educators,
theorists and feminists such as John Miller, Paulo Friere, bell hooks and others stress the responsibility for educators is to engage in revolutionary teaching because pedagogical methods applied in schools today only work to serve the interests of oppression, which causes frustration and suffering. This suffering has compelled educators to reexamine their pedagogical reach. The results of capitalism have created an oppressive culture that serves an established system of needs. The patriarchal hierarchical model of dominance institutionalizes violence through a process of control and fragmentation that is destroying the cohesive culture of humanity. Feminist and social activist bell hooks discusses the dehumanizing qualities of an oppressive pedagogy and expresses “...it is painfully clear that biases that uphold and maintain white supremacy, imperialism, sexism, and racism have distorted education so that it is no longer about the practice of freedom” (1994, p. 29). The individual, disconnected from shared meaning under the pretense of a mechanical, prescribed, and impassive education, has their senses dulled and their human potential nullified. Knowing this, the notion ‘I can’t teach anything’ rings true.

So how then, in this climate, can educators inspire student thinking? Freire, a theorist of critical pedagogy, urges that learning can only be liberating when done by “...praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (1993, p. 51). Education that is transformative is motivated by contemplation, compassion, and creativity. Ron Miller, editor and author of works regarding the philosophy of holistic education feels, “It seeks to enable the wholeness of the human being to emerge and develop as fully as possible” (2000, p. 2). Concerning the meaning of education he reflects on words spoken by Maria Montessori, “We are empathetically pulled from a notion of education for the good of one nation, or one economic system, or one professional/managerial class, and pointed toward a notion of education for the good of the world as a whole” (2000, p. 6). Teachers who implement pedagogy that is more humanistic teach for awareness with a perspective that is holistic in nature. A holistic perspective serves a more truthful learning process that supports wellbeing and is experientially transformative.
Professor and author, John Miller, describes holistic education as learning that is transformative. He also believes, “Transformational learning acknowledges the wholeness of the child” (2007, p. 11). The wholeness of a child, he points out, is witnessed in the wholeness of his or her interconnectedness through relationships. It is in the interaction of these connections where meaning is made and awareness manifests. A key component to developing a holistic perspective is recognizing the importance of relationships. Nature, animals, people, objects, ideas, actions and feelings are not separate from one another, isolated. They are connected and this interrelatedness directs attention to the purpose to understand interdependence. The idea of interconnectedness is described in ancient Eastern philosophies. Tibetan Dzogchen Lama of the Nyingma tradition and teacher, Sogyal Rinpoche, wrote,

Think of a tree... a distinctly defined object... But when you look more closely at the tree, you will see ultimately it has no independent existence. When you contemplate it, you will find that it dissolves into an extremely subtle net of relationships that stretches across the universe. The rain that falls on its leaves, the wind that sways it, the soil that nourishes and sustains it, all the seasons and the weather, moonlight and starlight and sunlight—all form part of this tree.... You will discover that everything in the universe helps to make the tree what it is; that it cannot at any moment be isolated from anything else... (1993, p. 37).

The core root of interdependence teaches that there is a continuum between one and another. Therefore, within the face of the other is one’s self and within the face of one’s self is the other. In a relationship each and all exist both in part and in connection as a whole. Understanding relational interdependence is key to implementing a holistic practice because from this position, a teacher can contemplate the idea of valuing another and how to work with this most accurately.

Author, Ken Wilber, whose work is about Integral Theory, explains, “...a whole atom is part of a whole molecule, and the whole molecule is part of a whole cell, and the whole cell is part of a whole organism, and so on. Each of the entities is neither a whole nor a part, but a whole/part. A holon” (2000, p. 17). The extension linking one to the other has purpose and this purpose is embedded with value. For
example, the wheel as a whole has a value in its own fullness but when attached to a
vehicle the new wholeness is of a different value in its fullness. To truly feel the
interdependence between self and other, one must feel the inherent value in each
and all things. Value is like an artery that runs through all things different for the
purpose of sustaining association through change. It flows through changes that
arise due to the engagement of differing perspectives. The embracing of an idea
inspires the continual embracing of new ideas. This is significant for teachers
because while delivering pedagogy, the quality of rapport that is formed with
students, influences the quality of future interaction. Learning is ongoing. Teachers’
intention is to guide students by helping to develop meaning in a present
interaction, guiding as accurately as possible, so that the value of its meaning
transfers to the next situation.

holistic education is on relationships: the relationship between linear thinking and
intuition, the relationship between mind and body, the relationships between
various domains of knowledge, the relationship between the individual and
community, the relationship to the earth, and our relationship to our souls” (2007,
p. 13). Reflecting on relationships deepens our awareness of interconnectedness,
and with such knowing, we are provided with the skills needed to transform a
relationship. Transformation is embodied within the seeing of value at one stage of
learning, and this equips us with the potential to see value at the next stage.
Teaching for transformational learning is about more than managing academic
needs and enhancing specific skill sets to reach curriculum expectations. It is about
being able to see differently, to feel the layering of interconnected meaning and
revere the value at all stages of learning. It is about being able to honestly read the
“full” and “real” context of an interaction, to listen honestly and act truthfully to
support the student. It is about questioning personal and political assumptions for a
truer awareness. It is about transcending a less-than-natural environment and
experiencing the innate order of life where learning, guided in connection,
organically transpires. Pedagogy that serves interdependence ultimately allows for
the re-patterning of both traditional ways of seeing and preconditioned ways of being. It is in the process of re-patterning where the true learning really takes place.

The interactions that take place in the classroom create a reality that is reflective of the reality outside the classroom. Relationships extend within and beyond the classroom walls and through interactions shared meaning is passed along. Philosopher Martin Buber explains that sharing is the basis of reality; without sharing there is no reality. “He who takes his stand in relation shares in a reality, that is, in a being that neither merely belongs to him nor merely lies outside of him. All reality is an activity in which I share without being able to appropriate for myself. ...The more direct the contact with the Thou, the fuller is the sharing. The I is real in virtue of its sharing in reality” (1958, p. 67). In looking at the student as a whole through a shared reality we see many facets that reflect the larger picture. Teachers who consider this larger picture realize its impact on students’ lives and how it possibly influences their understanding. The larger picture I am referring to is the social, cultural, and political reality within which we live and teach. Students are walking realities that have experienced privilege and disadvantage. If teachers implement pedagogy that is not in accordance with the shared reality, the purpose or value then becomes futile. When we do not respond truthfully to the reality we sense, teaching and learning is less effective.

Shared meaning through relationships constructs reality and holistic thinking aims to see this reality as accurately as possible. The classroom in which we teach in is a microcosm of the social, cultural, and political context of society. Therefore, I want to examine the implementation of a holistic teaching practice with a feminist outlook because it examines dualism and confronts the patriarchal perspective as the “norm.” Feminism is grounded in recognizing gender discrimination. Feminist theorists Judith Butler and bell hooks expand this vision by showing how identity is not limited to gender and how multiple identity traits can integrate with one another. Butler says, “If one “is” a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, ... because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender
intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities” (2006, p. 4). Identity politics reveals the social construction of an identity and how, in this construction, acts of privilege and disadvantage can influence the maturation of one’s abilities in ways that are dehumanizing. The constructed reality of students in our classrooms is the voice that needs to be honestly represented if we are going to find cohesion between differences.

Feminist theorists argue that the Western patriarchal hierarchical perspective privileges a ‘norm’ which Audre Lorde, a feminist, human rights activist, and author defines as, “... white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure” (1984, p. 116). These traits define a dominant authority in Western culture. Systemic acts of sexism, racism, classism, homophobia and transphobia are barriers used to shame and marginalize people outside of this norm and are tools to manufacture a false reality. The outcome of internalized self-hatred and tolerance to injustice has desensitized the human mind-body connection by reprogramming it to mistrust its senses and fear its potentials. Acts indoctrinating self-mistrust consequently force us to solely depend on that which is external to the self. The hierarchal model of domination that is male-centered, teacher-centered, and subject-centered (Nakagawa, 2000, p. 89), is splitting apart our schools from within. The impact of this divide is threefold: it prevents one from sensitively knowing their true self, it prevents one from empathetically knowing another individual, and it prevents one from intuitively knowing within a larger collective. Masking one’s genuine expression under the force of fear-based control creates a dual reality that is debilitating and regressive for humanity and for the individual learner.

Conversely, holistic understanding aims to bring people back into their body-mind by being openly receptive of its empathetic, intuitive, and reflective potential. Supporting this connectionist view is the work of Riane Eisler, a social activist, an advocate of women and children, scholar, and writer, who designed a model called “partnership education.” She outlines a model based on “...partnership. It is more democratic, gender balanced, and integrated, eco conscious and celebrates mutual
responsibility, empathy, and caring” (Nakagawa, 2000, p. 89). Eisler believes “We need an education that counters the old dominator socialization, and with this, the unconscious valuing of the kinds of undemocratic, abusive, and even violent relations that were considered normal and moral in earlier, more authoritarian times” (Miller et al, 2005, p. 55). She emphasizes,

But partnership education is not only a matter of more self-directed learning, peer teaching, cooperative learning, more individualized assessment tools, and other partnership pedagogies. It is also a matter of what kinds of behaviours and values are presented as valuable in curriculum narratives. If young people are to develop their essential humanity, they need a view of human nature that grounds their hope in reality. And this view needs to be reflected in the kinds of behaviours and values the educational structure supports (Miller et al, 2005, p. 52).

Eisler points out that the integration of male and female is essential to cultivating human qualities such as empathy and caring, and that regard for both genders is important (Miller et al, 2005, p. 59). The crippling effect of discrimination is its ability to prevent self-acceptance by negatively enforcing division and internal self-doubt. Perceiving the self through the fragmented lens of shame makes it a struggle to accept one’s self fully. Non-integration, devaluation, and domination only lead to defeatism. But a vision of partnership with a holistic view acknowledges value in all qualities and recognizes their development in both men and women. Therefore if self-acceptance is vital for confidence and the nurturing of interdependence, it is imperative we teach with awareness, compassion, and care.

The ancient Chinese philosophy of Taoism teaches that female and male qualities encompass an inherent value each unto their own, but in their interdependence share a greater value. Author and physicist Fritjof Capra writes about the Chinese view of Tao. “The Chinese,… believed that there is an ultimate reality which underlies and unifies the multiple things and events we observe... They called this reality the Tao, which originally meant ‘the Way’. It is the way, or process, of the universe, the order of nature” (2000, p. 104). They believed in living in harmony with nature. People needed to observe nature, the flow and change, and recognize the patterns that arose within these cycles: the changing of the seasons,
the cycle of birth, growth and death, the interdependence between different forms of matter. The Chinese believed from observing the movements of nature, “...that whenever a situation develops to its extreme, it is bound to turn around and become its opposite” (Capra, 2000, p. 105). Organized within the motion of the Tao are the polar opposites identified as yin and yang. In manifestations of Tao, the relationship of yin and yang can be seen. The two can be imagined to enfold like Brazilian dancers engaged in the art of Capoeira. Responding to the other in symmetry, in closeness, yet apart. They are described by the Chinese view as,

Yin: dark, female, yielding, receptive, maternal, rest, contemplative, intuitive mind

Yang: bright, male, firm, strong, creative power, action, rational, intellect

The dancers, pillars of breath, composed of yin and yang fluently move in the essence between upright and curved, above and below, forward and withdrawn. Although these qualities are categorized as binary opposites they exist in relation. In the cycle of change, as one reaches its fullness, it enters into the other. “Life’, says Chuang Tzu, ‘is the blended harmony of the yin and yang”’(Capra, 2000, p. 107). The Chinese philosophy of Taoism shows the connection between the fixed and unfixed, structure and creativity, and the yang-male and the yin-female. These opposites are interdependent and together create a reality, holistic in nature. Reality is represented through experiential living and as each and all things participate in a series of interactions, meaning is created and transpires into learning. This process of learning evolves within the ongoing cycle of knowing and questioning which return us to the Socratic method.

Standardized education perpetuates the gender divide, making it difficult to incorporate a holistic influence. Feminist theory points out that the deterrent to including female inclined approaches is due to the regard for male centered pedagogical approaches. Feminist Jane Roland Martin expresses, “…the ideal of the educated person has been based in the male stereotype – objective, analytic, rational, interested in ideas and things, but not nurturing, empathetic, intuitive, and supportive. Education has emphasized the development and application of reason
and objective judgment; it has separated the mind from the body, thought from action and reason from emotion” (Gaskell, 1989, p. 48). Advancement in traditional academic study requires the molding of specific masculinized skills. John Miller’s work describes three positions for learning: the transmission (a one way flow of knowledge from teacher to student), transaction (a two way flow of shared learning), and transformation (an inclusive approach for interconnected understanding). The transaction position for learning is more interactive than the transmission position, but to keep the focus here is not enough. It still targets improving specific analytical skills and thinking styles, which limits the experiencing of deep-felt learning (Miller, 2007, p. 11). A study conducted by Elena Grigorenko and Robert Sternberg from Yale University investigated the role of thinking styles in academic performance. They analyzed 11 different styles, taking into account students’ abilities, and the results suggested that, “... the judicial, legislative, and executive styles showed significance associations with academic performance. In particular, students with higher scores on the legislative and judicial thinking styles tended to do better...” (1997, p. 305). These styles utilized a skill set that includes creating, formulating, planning, comparing, and evaluating. However, the transformation position broadens the scope of learning by being interactive, and also includes methods given less import that explore our introspective, empathetic, reflective, contemplative, and intuitive abilities.

Transformational learning is about working with all qualities in greater balance, valuing the whole child and integrating with their reality as truthfully as possible. Ron Miller believes, “The two fundamental principals of holistic education work together in dynamic balance: We start with the child, not abstractly but in reality – with the living child. But then we respond to the child, guided by a sensitive awareness of the world” (2000, p. 70). When teachers are open, listening and engaged, when they are empathetically in tune to their students, the relationship between them becomes transparent and fluid. The position of teacher and student is in greater alignment when their communication is more embracing and reciprocal. Interaction borne from this cohesiveness can mitigate assumptions based on
identity and ability, and begin to debunk this structurally masculinized view of learning.

Methods accentuating the qualities of empathy, compassion, and care are difficult to sustain because prevailing attitudes undervalue their inclusion and treat them as alternative, invalid, and substandard. These qualities naturally nurtured from within are deemed deviant and ignored in a goal-oriented system that trains for external approval. Identity constraints reveal and verify one’s existence as prescribed and teachers aware of this conditioning are examining how one becomes his or her already defined self. Inner reflection and contemplative practices can reveal, first, how fear of the undefined warrants the need to define, measure, and compartmentalize because we can make reliable patterns that allow for efficient prediction. Second, the reliance on form (traditional structures and expectations) as a means of proof prevents a person from seeing beyond that of which can be measured or predicted. Teachers who are awakened to this and are allowed and able to teach with empathy, compassion, and care are also teaching with willingness to feel humility, forgiveness, and uncertainty.

Entering into the unknown realm of being activates an emotional fear-based response because we can no longer predict with self-assurance and consequently, we mistrust our ability to visualize or intuit. The instability of fear prompts the grasping for stability, which we immediately seek by applying the intellect. Once stabilized by moving into the realm of knowing we enhance intellectual thought with a new feeling of assurance. Parker Palmer, an author and educator, speaks to the delusion of safety that comes from mastery. He says, “To know a subject too well, and not to venture into others, is to risk becoming closed to fresh insight...” (1993, p. 114). The seesaw effect that comes from losing and gaining stability is best countered by combining intellectual and emotional capabilities. The emotional potential of humans to feel, empathize, visualize, and create, allows us to learn how to intuit through the unknowing space. Palmer continues, “But when a teacher is continually exploring alien, uncharted territory, humility and openness to grace are cultivated. The teacher is constantly reminded that he or she does not know it all,
and the resultant openness of mind creates a space in which both students and subject can speak fresh truth" (1993, p. 114). Implementing an ongoing practice that encourages healthful conducts for exploring can restore our faith, trust, and desire to work constructively between the realms of knowing and unknowing.

Teachers fixed in their identity teach from a position of assumption based in fear. A position where they are cut from their feminine and spiritual qualities, cut from emotional and intuitive ways of knowing, and cut from their truthful nature. Threatened by potential loss of authority, they teach from a position that prevents self-acceptance and partnership. In order to restore our essence we need to be aware of the fact that we ourselves are a seed to actualizing change. We mirror to students how we can transform. We need to recognize in ourselves how we bring into equilibrium our own emotional, intellectual, physical, and spiritual learning capabilities. Developing self-awareness asks that we courageously look at ourselves and see openly our merits and shortcomings, a task of acceptance that requires a compassionate, humble, and forgiving heart. To treat one’s self with kindness, to help one’s self heal in suffering is to see one’s self empathetically and therefore model empathy.

How we see inwards mirrors how we see outwards and therefore, the values we cultivate in ourselves naturally pass though our actions. The intertwining of self-awareness and self-acceptance is critical for effective teaching that involves working with the mind and heart. A mindful professional approach grows through a personal contemplative practice. “If knowledge allows us to receive the world as it is, solitude allows us to receive ourselves as we are” (Palmer, 1993, p. 121). Palmer discusses the importance of cultivating silence, solitude, and prayer; similarly Yoshiharu Nakagawa and Miller discuss the meaningfulness of contemplation and meditation. Author and educator Nakagawa explains, “Generally speaking, contemplation or meditation is an art of awareness in its basic forms; it is the art of being aware of that which is taking place in the present moment without intervention of the mind” (2000, p. 178). He reflects on Miller who said, “...contemplation allows the teacher to develop Self-learning, to cope with daily stress, to overcome the sense of
separateness, and to teach from the Self” (2000, p. 177). Contemplation allows us to see beyond the limits of our human sensitivity to more intuitive and spiritual ways of seeing. Contemplation supports the letting go of one’s self, enough so that he or she can intuitively sense the lifeline of interconnectedness. The breadth of this seeing accesses something wiser and spiritual. Sogyal Rinpoche advises that listening and hearing, contemplation and reflection, and meditation are the three tools used to discover the freedom of the wisdom of egolessness (1993, p. 125). “...really to listen in the way that is meant by the masters is to let go utterly of ourselves, to let go of all the information, all the concepts, all the ideas, and all the prejudices that our heads are stuffed with. If you really listen to the teachings, those concepts that are our real hindrance, the one thing that stands between us and our true nature, can slowly and steadily be washed away” (1993, p. 126). He makes reference to Zen master Suzuki-roshi, who said, “If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything” (1993, p. 126). Contemplation - reflection - meditation have a key part in the deepening of understanding. “After listening to the teachings and reflecting on them, we put into action the insights we have gained and apply them directly, through the process of meditation, to the needs of everyday life” (1993, p. 126).

In Western culture the process of “letting-go” is not considered to be freeing. We see it as loss or losing - something to be feared. Freedom is the power to control and consume. Typically a good education has prepared students to be productive citizens in the workforce. In a capitalist society a productive citizen has the financial backing to buy their freedom. Scholarly education teaches the value of who you are derives from what you do, not how you do it. Teaching practices in schools that standardize learning in fast paced, competitive and exclusive environments, teach for independence and achievement. The sacrificing of interdependence can breed qualities such as apathy, lack of responsibility and respectful, and egocentricity. Professors Edmund O’Sullivan and John Miller have described a perspective of the modern world that is mechanical, materialistic, and fragmented, a world of vast separateness, which inhibits our ability to create a shared sense of meaning. Miller
refers to Gregg Easterbrook who points out that although we have material possessions we are not happier (2007, p. 4). As long as education is blind to spirituality we are routed to walking around in unopened circles. Learning is only freeing when we make the choice to grow. Letting-go is not just about losing. It also encompasses the act of embracing; a willingness to discover insightful ways that will open our circular patterns for new seeing.

However Palmer notes that positive change is incurred with responsible action, not by the passive blaming of institutions. “So the transformation of teaching must begin in the transformed heart of the teacher. Only in the heart searched and transformed by truth will new teaching techniques and strategies for institutional change find sure grounding” (1993, p. 107). As teachers recognize and feel within themselves how contemplation and transformation yield compassion, they will be able to inspire it within their students despite the constraints of the system. In the service of true learning, the rippling effect of transformation on a personal level reaches the communal and the universal level through the continuum of interdependence.

Regularly engaging in contemplation and meditation hones our senses to the natural rhythms of living, restoring our attentiveness to interdependence. Students, as Freire points out, are not purely passive in their learning. They are not ‘empty vessels’ void of perspective. On the contrary, they are interactive, engaged, ready and interested. Students are rich with understanding and meaning. Therefore, the implementation of holistic pedagogy directly confronts the power differentiation by altering how we manage in our own position as co-creators. Re-patterning the internalized human mindset requires reflection, contemplation and meditation; practices that will help us shift how we typically see fear, power and valuation in the process of learning and teaching.

The systems theory Ken Wilber presents questions the traditional perception of a hierarchy. Wilber refers to Koestler who created the term ‘holarchy’ to represent natural hierarchy because natural hierarchies are composed of holons. “A natural hierarchy is simply an order of increasing wholeness, such as: particles to
atoms to cells to organisms, or letters to words to sentences to paragraphs. The whole of one level becomes a part of the whole of the next” (2000, p. 24). But Wilber says,

Because human beings have relatively more depth than, say, an amoeba, we have more rights – there are more conditions necessary to sustain the wholeness of a human – but we also have more responsibilities, not only to our own human societies of which we are parts, but to all of the communities of which our own subholons are parts. We exist in networks of relationships with holons in the physiosphere and the biosphere and the noosphere, and our relatively greater rights absolutely demand relatively greater responsibilities in all of these dimensions. Failure to meet these responsibilities means a failure to meet the conditions under which our holons and subholons can exist in communion... (2000, p. 303).

Congruency shared shows the whole cannot exist without all of its parts; at each level, value is different and necessary. Each one of us has a message to receive and to offer. In whatever position we are in, teaching and learning is reciprocal, with respect serving one to another. Learning is Spirit-in-action. The very secret of the evolutionary impulse is the process of transcending and including (Wilber, 2000, p. 27).

Putting one’s holistic understanding into practice is to cultivate learning that enriches goodness within relations. The more teachers engage in an effort to find balance by creating strategies that will integrate various learning styles and abilities, the more authentic teaching can be. Pedagogical methods that resist Western patriarchal notions will respond more accurately to a truer reality and naturally lead towards an education where learning is broader and liberating. Holistic thinking displays reverence for the human form, allowing for an expansion in awareness that extends from objective thought to spiritual intuitiveness. In unifying the senses the essence of soul can rise breathing real life into the curriculum. Teaching and learning through shared meaning is how sustainable transformation takes place.
CHAPTER 3

Holistic Model of Learning

What is a holistic model of learning? *It is continuous discovery of the present in its historical and future context.* Metaphorically, it looks like the order of a planted seedling that grows into a tree in pulse to a constant flow of unfolding creativity. *It is movement, rhythm, and change, beingness that is noticeably felt.* Like the wind seen in tumbling leaves, *it is breath that is breathed into a moment.* *It is an idea molded with meaning, nurtured, until in its ripeness it disappears by way of change.* At the site of resistance the model appears, at the point of friction it transforms, and in transition it blossoms with awareness. *The holistic model looks like the still and structured tree that bears fruit and lets it go.* 

*Holistic education is engaged pedagogy exists in educative service that guides students in their awareness to be fully present in their potential, to be mindful in their illustrative nature and sensitive in their reflection.*

A holistic model for learning is most transparent when teaching engages with tension. In the process of learning, tension comes into play as students participate in problem solving and inquiry, contrasting what they know with what they do not. Teachers enter into the push and pull rigidity of proscribed teaching and attune themselves to the rhythm of its course by observing, listening and sensing students’ involvement. They gauge their students during interactions and feel what is happening. They aim to read the full context in order to discern ‘when’ and ‘how’ to do ‘what’ next. Attention is given to the tension created by the contrast of differing perspectives, particularly of students and teachers.

In this chapter I want to highlight qualities that are relevant components in the learning process, components which help ease the tension of competing perspectives. The act of making a decision encompasses a level of resistance that we must be attentive to because tension is a tester of stability and the presence of instability can induce a fear of change. Teachers are guides, thinking and feeling their way through interactions with students. Their aim is to ease towards tension,
meet it, read it, and problem solve through it. However, creating a constructively even approach to meet tension in order to reduce the rise of conflict is challenging. The act of maintaining stability actually asks us to move towards this conflict while invoking our ability to do so reflectively. Qualities that aid us in working with tension are empathy, mindfulness, care, compassion, creativity, and spontaneity. Below I give a synthesis of these qualities in aim to show how using them in combination with rational, analytical, structured, and evaluative qualities can foster mindful/holistic teaching.

**Empathetic Nature**

Simon Baron-Cohen is a professor of Developmental Psychopathology and the author of numerous books regarding the theory of mind and empathy. In his work he explains that we all lie somewhere on an empathy spectrum that is in the form of a bell curve (2011, p. 15). He believes humans have the capacity to be empathetic; the degree to which individuals live by it is debatable. Baron-Cohen’s definition states: “Empathy occurs when we suspend our single minded-focus of attention and instead adopt a double-minded focus of attention” (2011, pp. 15-16). An empathetic individual thinks about other people’s thoughts and interests as well as his or her own mind. He further extends the definition by saying, “Empathy is our ability to identify what someone else is thinking or feeling and to respond to their thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion” (2011, p. 16). Our empathetic nature allows us to let go of ourselves and personify what someone else is experiencing. The shared understanding that is created through reflection helps us to respond appropriately. A shared understanding may not be felt exactly the same way between two people but there is a connection of emotional sincerity felt that will help guide an emotionally intelligent response.

Analysis of the mind-body connection shows our capacity to be empathetic through embodied knowing. Baron-Cohen’s book “The Science of Evil” was
published a few years after Frans de Waal’s book, “Age of Empathy”. De Wall is a primatologist and ethologist who studies empathy and social connection among different species. He explains, "We’re beginning to realize how much human and animal cognition runs via the body. Instead of our brain being like a little computer that orders the body around, the body-brain relation is a two-way street. The body produces internal sensations and communicates with other bodies, out of which we construct social connections and an appreciation of the surrounding reality" (2009, pg. 59).

Empathy is not a recent phenomenon. Both scientists have linked it to age-old brain development and even suggest it likely predates the human species (de Waal, 2009, p. 208). Empathy is an instinctual trait we use from birth; before we are reading words, it is our nature to read emotions and actions. Therefore, to silence ancient insight and cut it out of education is a senseless act that disconnects teaching from its roots and ultimately human experience from its roots. Outcome-based teaching places emphasis on looking forward which depletes the desire for looking back. However the principles of nature demonstrate that the sun from above cannot nurture alone. The rain always draws us back down to our roots.

Empathy is integral to holistic education. By being empathetic in our teaching compassion resonates through interactive learning. For this form of engagement to transpire, developing awareness of the self is essential because to understand someone else’s experience we must know our own. Therefore, we need to be able to recognize and sense our self through exercising our own inner agency (de Waal, 2009, p. 147). Connecting with the self is the starting point to being able to connect with others. “Being able to empathize means being able to understand accurately the other person’s position, to identify with “where they are at”” (Baron-Cohen, 2011, p. 18). Empathetic engagement overcomes obstacles by reframing oppositional attitudes from a closed to an open state so that meaningful connections can be made.
Empathetic ‘perspective-taking’ is explained by de Waal as a, “...combination of emotional arousal, which makes us care, and a cognitive approach, which helps us appraise the situation...” (2009, p. 100). During interactions, teachers who are able to envision and acknowledge a student’s perspective and responses have an intuitive sense for when and how to push or ease off from an expectation. Evaluation plays a pivotal role in the processes of problem solving and conflict-resolution. It is most accurate when teachers as co-creators of learning, read the reality of a situation openly and truthfully.

Maintaining the cohesive process of teaching and learning is a challenge under the pressures of student’s fear of failure, teacher’s mandate for accountability, and societal attitudes supporting inequality, independence, competition and greed. All these variants together have the potential to squash traits that are vital to empathy. It is imperative that the idea of a “feeling brain” is grounded in education as we head into the 21st century. “With empathy we have a resource to resolve conflict, increase community cohesion, and dissolve another person’s pain” (Baron-Cohen, 2011, p. 183). Modern scientific studies, theory, philosophy and ancient spirituality confirm the importance of empathy, yet conventional pedagogy ignores this. Revitalizing the role of empathy in education today can and is happening gently one teacher at a time as the focus of their individual practices encompasses introspection, imagination, visualization, and intuition. Baron-Cohen considers people who have a higher capacity to be empathetic are those who have grown up in trusting relationships feeling nurtured, safe, and secure. They are able to readjust to change, reciprocate, gauge and predict, manage stress, and see another’s perspective. He believes these elements are needed to support a sense of wellbeing. If students are to be truly successful then we need to include our empathetic nature in our pedagogical repertoire.

Activities supporting emphatic qualities in the classroom are:

- drama, role-play
- written or oral discussion – teacher guided synthesis of another perspective
• writing in role

• self reflection (oral, written or in silent contemplation), journal responses

• interacting with and reflecting upon nature

• group work and pair-share activities that encourage listening and observing and include a reflective component

• open-ended student guided discussion that encompasses exploring and building on shared ideas.

• conflict-resolution strategies, moral dilemma problem-solving

Reflective Nature

The famous phrase made by Ghandi, ‘be the change you wish to see’ is so simply put, yet to ‘do’ it requires great inner strength and courage. Freire discusses the significance of praxis in teaching. He stresses the point that being a revolutionary teacher requires one to constantly reflect on theory and practice. To ‘be the change’ is to self-actualize; it is to become one’s awareness, as transformation is the actualizing of choice. Therefore making the most rightful choice means taking on the responsibility to listen and observe honestly. Decisions made in accordance with a more truthful awareness share in a truer reality. Parker Palmer provides, “Truth – wherever it may be found and in whatever form – is personal, to be known in personal relationships. ...The speaking of that word becomes the living of our lives” (1993, p. 49). In the classroom a reflective teacher must have courage: the courage to question his or her assumptions, the courage to forsake these assumptions, and the courage to accept another’s perspective, direction, way, or knowing. Oppressive socialization has cultivated a false reality by normalizing assumptions. Until these assumptions are demystified we continue to perpetuate them. A merit of our reflective nature is that it provides us with an opportunity to reconsider our assumptions based on the results of inquiry. As
Ghandi says, we have the ability to change. Therefore we must do so as rightfully as possible.

If truth is personal and communal, then our search for truth – and truth’s search for us – will neither actively suppress nor passively concede our differences, but will invite them to interact in faithful relationship. The world’s diversity goes for beyond the differences between men and women, blacks and whites, Christian and Jews. These fade into insignificance... If our approach to knowing fails to invite the creative interaction of this radical pluralism...then it is not an approach to truth, not a way of knowing that can recover the organic community of creation (Palmer, 1993, pp. 66-67).

I have learned much from my own experience. I know that how often I engage in reflection has changed throughout the duration of my career. When I was first teaching I reflected at the culmination of a situation, lesson, or day. But over time the familiarity of this routine paved the way for more immediate reflection to occur during a situation. I found the more I exercised reflective behaviour the easier it became. I learned to slow down and think meaningfully during the situation and after. I have noticed that heightened emotions impede the process of slowing down and therefore I have to attentively gauge subtle emotional responses regularly. I have learned to read signals in student’s behaviour or in my own that suggest we are getting closer to differences that can spark conflict. The slowing down and re-reading of responses has helped me to maintain the level of calmness and authenticity needed for our interactions.

Responding genuinely to reflection can be a great challenge. Ramifications for opposing mainstream thought can make it difficult to sustain honesty and self-actualize for change. There is risk in exhibiting a genuine response, as others may not positively receive it. When a student or teacher decides to share by divulging an experience there is the threat of vulnerability. I, for instance, do not disclose my sexual orientation to my students for a number of reasons. Even though students will naturally inquire about my personal life, as they do with other teachers, I refrain from sharing the truth, an act that causes me to battle with the feeling I am compromising my honesty. However, I believe change happens in small increments.
I also understand critical reflection is ongoing. So I work at holding a positive intention and gently shift towards its manifestation. I feel a true vision can be felt beyond what is directly in front of us.

Teaching strategies for reflection can take the shape of:

• end of week reflections stating meaningful moments

• written reflection completed during and at the end of a unit, or term for students to monitor changes in their ideas, attitudes, and or emotions

• written reflection based on an assignment, project or presentation

• student feedback to inform teachers

• monitoring behaviour and social skills for everyday needs and the report card

• journal responses addressing environmental, social justice or political issues

• verbal reflections done as a whole class, in small groups or in a pair-share after viewing a film, documentary, presentation, lesson, or trip

• twenty to thirty minutes of open-ended discussion on a given topic exploring pertinent issues and student perspectives

• teacher and student inspired questions that are open-ended

• one minute silence used to refocus attention, still the mind and reflect by closing one’s eyes and sitting comfortably

• brief contemplation of something through the physical senses such as the tasting of food, listening to a segment of music, or observing a piece of artwork

• five minute mindfulness - observe something in nature, note changes and make connections

• deep breathing and relaxation of the mind and muscles using movement and yoga techniques
Nurturing nature

Historically care has been typically viewed as a feminine trait and was synonymous with mothering. Due to this view the cultivation of care has been a responsibility that takes place at home. But Noddings and other feminist authors believe care is significant to the learning process, and schooling that ignores the private sphere delegitimize its place and worth. Jane Roland Martin is referred to in “Claiming an Education” and she argues that,

...the ideal of the educated person has been based in the male stereotype – objective, analytic, rational, interested in ideas and things, but not nurturing, empathetic, intuitive, or supportive. Education has emphasized the development and application of reason and objective judgment; it had separated the mind from the body, thought from action and reason from emotion (Gaskell et al., 1989, p. 48).

Author Marjorie O’Loughlin writes about the ‘experiencing body’ and she asserts we cannot examine the connection between emotion and education without considering the “...deep-seated association of male-female and reason-emotion dualisms” (2006, p. 139). O’Loughin sites Boler who “sees emotion as reflecting the dynamics of one’s specific lived situation, which by definition, will always include the social. For her, as for Dewey, emotions are inseparable from action and relations, and therefore from issue of power” (2006, p. 140). Care is not isolated to the female nor is it to the private sphere; it is within the human capacity and within the whole/universal sphere.

Nel Noddings, a professor of education and prominent author on the subject of care in schools, stresses that care is a fundamental component of learning. Noddings defines caring as relational. “Caring is a way of being in relation, not a set of specific behaviours” (2005, p. 17). She states, “A caring relation is, ...a connection or encounter between two human beings – a carer and a recipient of care...” (2005, p. 15). Interpersonal skills are activated during dialogue and this includes the capacity of caring. Nakagawa extends Noddings’ idea of care to compassion. Nakagawa writes,
The Buddhist idea of compassion can radically transform the meaning of caring. Caring learns to involve a deeper function than fulfilling basic human needs. Underlying a personal relation between the one-caring and the cared-for, another dimension of caring exists that comes from the Other-power of the infinite reality; those who care for each other are always already cared for by Amida... (2000, p. 232).

He describes that compassion resonates from Amida, our innermost self – a place of purity. He suggests we can enhance our trust in the work of “Other-power” through contemplation, and by surrendering our egocentric self we experience enlightenment. Here we are fully and completely cared for by Amida and compassion flows into and through us (Nakagawa, 2000, p. 230). Miller relates this to teaching and believes compassionate and caring teachers can contribute to nourishing the soul, and through continuous acts of thoughtfulness the student’s soul can feel safe to express itself (2000, p. 141).

O’Loughlin asserts there is a widespread intolerance to the inclusion of emotions in teaching because emotional knowing is not considered ‘real’ knowing. Emotional intelligence is considered to weaken the validity of academic rigor (2006, p. 141). Similarly, author Adir Cohen reflects on the work of Erich Fromm, a humanistic philosopher, who feels Western society is generally dismissive of emotional expression. “According to [Fromm], the descriptive term “emotional” has become synonymous with “stupid” or “confused”” (1990, p. 73). Noddings, as well as others, argues for change. She writes,

Classrooms should be places in which students can legitimately act on a rich variety of purposes, in which wonder and curiosity are alive, in which students and teachers live together and grow. I too, believe that a dedication to full human growth...will not stunt or impede intellectual development, but even if it might, I would take the risk if I could to produce people who would live nonviolently with each other, sensitively and in harmony with the natural environment, reflectively and serenely with themselves (2005, p. 12).

Learning is a process embodying the full potential of being human, which includes emotional, physical, and spiritual ways of experiencing, as well as intellectual, and
each attribute supports the other. Invalidating one will only weaken another. Therefore underscoring a vision that encompasses true learning is our capacity to be nurturing, caring and compassionate.

Listening, observing and reflecting are skills to be practiced with care to ensure an individual optimizes his or her full capacity for a response that is as genuine as possible. A nurturing response is true with love. Freire and Fromm discuss the relevance of love and believe that a true word spoken is an act of creation and this can only be done with love. It is important in education that teachers practice care so students see it, feel it, and embody it in order to prepare to be caring. Cohen’s work cites Fromm’s view regarding education for the love of life. He says,

...Fromm stresses that the most important condition for the development of love of life in the child is the child’s presence among people who love life. The love of life is contagious... it is translated without words, explanations, or sermons on the need for the love of life. One can recognize the love of life according to the general atmosphere characterizing an individual or group of people, rather than overt principals or laws according to which life is organized (1990, p. 45).

Deeply embedded in the act of nurturing is humility, an attribute that supports the ability to forgive and be self-accepting. The ability to care for and love the self is a struggle with one’s feeling of being at fault. The inability to accept one’s limitations makes it difficult to sustain a truthful and caring relationship with the self, without which it is impossible to grow in trusting and loving relationships with others. “Man’s affirmation of his own life, happiness, growth and liberty stems from his ability to love – from his respect and care of himself, responsibility to himself, and knowledge of himself. A man capable of loving creatively must also love himself. If he is only capable of loving others, then he is not truly capable of love” (Cohen, 1990, p. 66). Self-acceptance includes acceptance of our human form, acceptance for all our capacities, understanding that we are without knowing and incomplete. Yet this understanding of our own limitations does not erase our care and intention to deepen our awareness. The strength gleaned from loving, nurturing, and caring for
our selves provides the courage to transform our misjudgments, assumptions and inaccuracies. Accepting our errors stirs further wondering and guides our reflective nature more responsibly. Self-acceptance motivates respect for our selves, life and the world as a whole (Cohen, 1990, p. 44).

Care for learning demonstrates our faith in learning. Not being able to accurately predict an outcome does not imply there is no learning happening. Inquiry opens the door and welcomes the unknown, bumping us off our path of predictability and forcing us to stop and question an assumed way of seeing. At this time, we are left dangling on the edge of what we know. Uncertainty reveals how care is necessary to extend our faith. With faith, we courageously leap into a web of interactions trusting in our own abilities and in the abilities of others. We trust in a rightful exchange of informing and being informed. Faith in the teaching-learning process allows us to build confidence in ourselves and support it in others. In the classroom everyone is everyone’s teacher. A caring teacher is one who can set the tone for students to care that they do not know and feel safe to explore not knowing. Nurtured within them is the faith in their ability to seek.

Nurturance in the classroom can take the shape of:

• care to observe, listen and increase wait-time for responses
• care to ask questions that are open-ended
• care for classroom routines, responsibilities and belongings
• once a week a period can be set aside to openly discuss classroom dynamics
• care during circle time, conflict resolution, trust exercises and co-operative games
• care for nature and animals
• care to explore: thinking; thinking about our thinking; explore and support beliefs
• care for our physical wellbeing: stretching, activities to reenergize, healthy diet
Creative Nature

“Teaching is an art informed by both science and an individual’s personal experience over time” (Bennett, 2001, p. 5). It requires a teacher to be both knowledgeable and creative. Teaching holistically is done with the intention of being open to transformation. Transformation, the actualizing of choice, happens through the creative application of pedagogy. Professor Barrie Bennett states, “Pedagogy is the collective term that refers to the instructional concepts, skills, tactics, strategies, and organizers available to teachers to create learning environments that encourage students to learn” (2001, p. 38). Teachers and students use their tools creatively and together co-create learning opportunities. Creativity flourishes in the how of teaching. The implementation of holistic thought in education is not about dismissing the science of teaching. Rather, it is about embracing technique and imagination. Stephan Nachmanovitch, a musician, author, and educator, explains in his book: “Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art”, “You certainly use your training; you refer to it, understand it, ground yourself in it, but you don’t allow your training to blind you to the actual person who is sitting in front of you. In this way you pass beyond competence to presence. To do anything artistically you have to acquire technique, but you create through your technique and not with it” (1990, p. 21).

Inspired teaching is open to both instruction and insight. In creative practice, skill and imagination play together in the wake of curiosity. The readiness to surrender to spontaneity and intuitive knowing is in this space of playfulness. The blend of teaching and learning revolves around the core of change, where, as I said before, tension between stability and instability is strongly felt. In order to maintain stability we need to be ready and willing to readjust.

The constant repositioning can make us feel uncomfortable. It is a problem-solving initiative that is sensitive to how creativity and structure, originality and familiarity, imagination and reason, openness and evaluation integrate. If we can find a balanced state among these elements, our love to learn will meet with our fear to change. By patiently moving through critical reflection we can stay stable until
our willingness to adjust materializes. In this equilibrium of love and fear teachers and students create. Fear commands us to be mindful, so that in love we can readily let go, at the right time, for creation to bloom. As teachers, "We still engage in the important practice of planning and scheduling – not to rigidly lock in the future, but to tune up the self. In planning we focus attention on the field we are about to enter, then release the plan and discover the reality of time’s flow. Thus we tap into living synchronicity" (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 21).

The spontaneous and intuitive moments that make the unknown tangible are intrinsic to creative expression. While we examine the art and science of becoming (creative expression) we can notice two distinct aspects: firstly, what we are aware of through reasoning and secondly, what we are aware of through intuition. In the second, there exists an essence that is notably felt. The imagination calls it forward, and, like a gentle breath, it is energizing. In the voice of Nachmanovitch, “Play is an attitude, a spirit, a way of doing things…” (1990, p. 43).

During interaction teachers and students play with dialogue, with tools, techniques and meaning. Ideas collapse and new ideas form. They share what they know while exploring what they do not know in a context of materials, resources, curriculum, concepts, experience, and imagination. Teachers tune in during the play of learning by being flexible and spontaneous, and by being open to the spirit of play. Guided by this awareness teachers can enrich learning by altering techniques, changing tools, modifying expectations, readjusting the schedule or reframing perspective more evenly and naturally. The ability to tap into this collective flow is based in our ability to tap into our inner sense of knowing. The more we reflect inward the further out we can see.

When teachers and students are truly engaged in insightful play they disappear in the unfolding of knowing and exploring. In the art of teaching and learning they are in the present of joyfulness and challenge, willing to surrender, and curious to see what will come forth not just from their spirit but also from the greater spirit of our interconnectedness.
In play we manifest fresh, interactive ways of relating with people, animals, things, ideas, images, ourselves. It flies in the face of social hierarchies. We toss together elements that were formally separate. Our actions take on novel sequences. To play is to free ourselves from arbitrary restrictions and expand our field of action. Our play fosters richness of response and adaptive flexibility. This is the evolutionary value of play – play makes us flexible. By reinterpreting reality and begetting novelty, we keep from becoming rigid. Play enables us to rearrange our capacities and our very identity so that they can be used in unforeseen ways (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 43).

Creative expression in the classroom can look like:

- fine arts: drawing, painting, sculpting, cut and paste
- photography and computer graphics
- music: instruments, singing, choir
- dance, movement, yoga, drama
- design and technology and home economics
- guided visualization
- mathematic problem solving
- scientific exploration
- creative writing, poetry, story-telling

Teachers who trust in their ability to work within the craft of learning can feel more at ease working with the whole student. They work with resources in creative ways, using their intuition. They see how to use tools best, and they rely, not only on their own abilities, but also on the potential creativity of their students. In the openness created by trust, teachers are more likely to reach outcomes both meaningful and unexpected with their students.
SHAY
Shay and I met during the early evening at the end of a long week. Her congenial nature was welcoming and from the moment we sat down she expressed an eagerness to begin sharing. Shay expressed that she was glad to have this opportunity to talk about her new school and the journey she has undertaken for the past two years. Our interview began with the description of a park, a grove for a playground that is centered within a community and central to the birth of her current school.

Our school was started by a group of parents who were hanging out together in [a community] park talking about their kids and what they were hoping for their kids in terms of when they were going to school. They wanted a school that sort of reflected the values of [this particular] park. So [this] park is a really exciting park in downtown. There are a lot of initiatives that involve community. There’s a farmers market every week. People gather together every Friday for community dinners. There are fire pits you can access. It just has a feeling where community has a strong voice and they’ve created a space that really responds to the needs of the community. So I think their hope was that they could create a school that reflected some of the experience that they’ve had in the park.

Shay proudly voiced that the school opened its doors in 2009 to the public because of the initiation taken by parents. Her focus on the dynamics within the community revealed, that to her, this is where the core values of the school stem from. For two years a network of parents and educators worked long rigorous hours to have this school approved by the public school board. She identified the components parents were striving for like this:

So the parents articulated very clearly in a parent handbook, a vision for the school. [It] included curriculum that reflects social justice, equity, community activism, and environmental issues. They also wanted an arts infused curriculum, holistic education, restorative justice practices, non-traditional forms of assessment and students who were engaged in the democratic process.

The list at length seemed all embracing. It exposed their conviction to follow through with a plan that would produce a shift in the perspective of public education. They wanted a learning environment that emphasized connectedness and teaching practices that would offer students choices for exploration. So, starting
at the primary level and with only three classrooms, the school began its journey 
with the intention to add a grade each year.

The area surrounding the small elementary school consists of a 
neighborhood park, public library, and recreational centre, all of which aim to 
support a quality dwelling for families. Members of the community are of mixed 
ethnicity and income. The school is also housed within a larger public school. The 
existing administration is shared between them. There are 83 students attending 
the school with a close to equal ratio of boys to girls, 49% to 51%. Student entry 
begins at junior kindergarten and continues on up to grade six. There is an active 
parent council that is involved with the running of various committees. The staff 
here is limited in size but they hold grand ambitions. Shay expressed the desire to 
push the bounds of the public school system. The aim is to engage in a process with 
a team of parents and colleagues to create and implement structure, initiatives and 
curriculum to support a holistic approach, and a vision that demonstrates their 
commitment to learning. Shay stressed, “we’re an exciting school and we’re really 
trying to think outside the box and really trying to think about how we can be 
transformative.”

Her career in teaching began at an alternative private school. The time Shay 
spent here was extremely valuable because it is where the root of her philosophy 
developed. She describes the curriculum as organic because it reflected both 
student’s experiences and world events. Teachers’ delivery of the curriculum would 
unfold through a creative and flexible process that she felt made meaningful 
connections between students and their lives. Shay found it to be an inspiring 
model, which still informs her practice today. But eventually she left the private 
school and began teaching within the public school board. Ironically, the public 
schools she later taught at housed alternative schools within them, which provided 
her with the opportunity to observe what they were doing. In time, the regular 
school programming frustrated her because of the isolation she felt. When Shay 
reached out to colleagues with ideas for school wide activities, she received the 
response, “ahhh, you know, maybe later.” There was little intention or support for
staff collaboration. This lack of shared communication left her feeling lonely and increased her curiosity to know what exactly was happening in these alternative programs.

Shay was drawn to the alternative program, “I was watching them and I became friends quickly with the alternative school teachers because I really felt like my values and my philosophy and my approach to teaching were aligned with theirs.” So when a parent approached her with news that there were openings at a new alternative public school she eagerly responded and her application was accepted.

Her first year at the new school was an incredible challenge. Diligently she worked within the ongoing cycle of processing, running continuously on the treadmill of revision. The job demanded much of her energy, time and effort, more than she could have ever imagined. She felt the pull of her job on her personal life and worked to maintain a healthy balance. Shay spoke passionately and described her intentions saying,

What I feel like I’m trying to do at [my current school] is essentially recreate the [private] school that I was at, and I’ve brought a lot of ideas from there into [my current school]. So I think it was curiosity but it was also a craving for collaboration and it was also wanting to challenge myself to develop curriculum and put equity, and social justice, and environment at the centre and start there and see what that would look like in the classroom.

Shay wanted to teach within a community that shared similar philosophies and with teachers who would share in the personal challenge of putting one’s beliefs into practice. Critical to Shay’s practice is her involvement within the classroom, the school and the parent community. She assumes responsibilities that encourage parents’ participation both in the classroom and on parent council. She leads whole school activities in the park for students in all grades. In the classroom, she also focuses on using strategies that will nurture healthy relationships between students and within one’s self. Pedagogically her aim is to foster students’ self-awareness through the process of reflection. Shay conveys, “So I do a lot of work around
cooperative learning and really explicitly teaching cooperative learning strategies and reflecting all the time on how well we’re doing in terms of our roles and how well we’re caring for each other as a community.” She asks students’ to observe themselves in their actions, in their work and question what they see. She reveres this as a significant and powerful tool for processing when engaged in learning.

Shay reveals her ideas on teaching from a holistic perspective by saying,

I think a holistic perspective would be opening up your mind to recognizing that kids learn in lots of different ways and that kids need a variety of experiences to demonstrate what they know and demonstrate their learning. They need diverse experiences. So I feel like holistic, the word that comes is the whole child, honouring the whole child. The emotional intelligence, the academic intelligence, the social intelligence, like all the different parts that help kids to be successful at school because you can be academic smart but if you don’t know how to disagree respectfully with someone, or if you don’t know how to set a goal, or you don’t have that motivation or that perseverance it’s going to have a huge impact on your academic success. So I feel like holistic education is just being open to multiple points of entry and multiple ways of honouring the diversity in your class. I think making room for experiences that are beyond the books.

Shay articulates a clear but evolving vision for teaching. She is aware that perspectives will alter as personal objectives blend with those of the public school boards. She views education as rather conservative and traditional, organized by rules and regulations and working within these limits to generate opportunities means justifying the legitimacy of her choices. But the reward is significant when efforts that include unconventional ideas are met with success. Student engagement and a collegial and collaborative staff inspire her love and liveliness for teaching. As stated by Shay, “I just feel like... I just want to be a teacher that’s opening the door, open to bringing in the outside world but talking to kids about what’s really going on in their lives. I’m curious to see. I know we’re gonna hit a lot of road blocks. But I wanna see how far we can push, how transformative can we be, working within a giant machine.”
Harriet works on staff with Shay and began teaching at the school in its second year of existence. Previously she taught at a downtown alternative school where she was content with the teaching style and the level of collaboration. She found the implementation of learning opportunities that supported multi-aged groupings to be really successful. Although the staff worked cooperatively eventually conflict surfaced when they were in the midst of redefining the schools’ vision. During discussion parents and teachers voiced differing views concerning the intent and purpose for the school and Harriet felt the focus of peace making was deteriorating. She valued peace building and community so she was deterred from wanting to remain there. She was frustrated with the idea that her school was in an “identity crisis”. She felt like they were “going around in circles” or “hitting brick walls” when they engaged in problem solving. Deep down Harriet was aware of her beliefs and dedicated to their development. Ultimately, she wished to be at a school where she could bring her ideas to fruition. Fortunately an opportunity at a new alternative school opened up. Today, she thinks back, and recalls the feeling of relief brought on by the idea of being able to share a common attitude with her colleagues. At that time, “‘I knew,’ she affirmed steadily, ‘that my philosophies aligned with some of the philosophies of the [school] community.’”

Harriet was in contact with parents who resided in the community of this new west end public school. Based on the trusting connection she had with many of the locals and some research she had done she applied for a position. By the end of her first year, she felt it was a worthy move. Right from the beginning she was able to teach, plan and interact with others in an environment that fostered supportive relations. She tells a bit of her story like this:

It’s really empowering and addictive to collaborate and to share ideas and to build on those ideas. It seemed like the [west end alternative school] had that. Like it was so exciting to plan and to bounce ideas and to knowledge build and I just found that it was so intuitive. Our daily lunches and our daily morning coffees were all about planning new projects, new ideas. So I actually was attracted by the parents to begin with, but then once I established my position there as the phys. ed. teacher, visual arts teacher, and science teacher – it just took a
fluid form – like, everything started to fall into place and it really felt like an organic process...

For Harriet this change was a natural progression. She was able to fit in to an already existing structure because her ideology corresponded with the ideology of the teachers on staff. She believes open and cohesive collaboration is key for sustaining positive and productive initiatives.

Harriet provided a clear depiction of the school’s vision. She identifies the three main pillars her school stands on and feels that with these in mind a course of direction can be clearly set. She feels the unified environment further enriches learning. Harriet’s impression is:

So schools just weren’t diving deep enough. Mainstream regular public schools just weren’t getting as deep into activism and social justice and environmentalism as I guess this community was seeing. Also there were families, alternative families - structures going into the school system. For example, queer families. There's a lot of exclusion and there's a lot of bullying that was being witnessed. So our school was created out of that need, for social justice and environmentalism, and the other pillar, equity...

Her view of mainstream public schools is that their attention to academic excellence is limiting in their ability to meet children’s full potential for learning. She points out a significant difference in her school is the notion of weaving issues regarding activism, inclusion, and conflict resolution into the curriculum. It is important to realize that these issues uncover the significance of emotion, which is often ignored when holding a strict academic focus. As Harriet implies, to deepen understanding we cannot continue to ignore the personally expressive. Emotional and intellectual learning occurs in tandem; feelings are not an addition to learning but are embedded in it. Harriet suggests the public school board is beginning to acknowledge this notion but incorporating it remains at the preliminary stage. Little action has taken place to intentionally transfer this understanding to the pedagogical level of practice in classrooms. As she points out, “Things are changing and it’s nice to see but I always see it in conferences, after school programs – it has to be extracurricular.”
Harriet spoke about what has influenced her into becoming the teacher she is today. She explained,

Yah, I did workshops with the aboriginal education centre and I found that was a really important connection to inform my own teaching, especially with environmental education. Because our school... one of the pillars is environmental education and the link to just aboriginal perspectives is, it's so closely tied. And I also find the work we did (it was an art project that my 4, 5, 6 class participated in) lends itself to kind of opening up the world of activism and equity. And just thinking about history and mistakes and what is fair and learning from that. That's one thing that really has made a huge impact. And just my own community, my own experience being queer, kind of outside was huge for me for teaching in alternative schools because I could be out. I could be comfortable being out knowing that there were kids, students that were also part of the out - kind of outside community looking in - and not feeling totally part of whatever's happening in a school, in a board, in you know, a ministry...

She makes a solid connection between who she is as a person and how that impacts her professional relationships. She highlighted the role of community and the part it plays in creating a secure space for genuine self-expression and inspiring the responsibility for advocating fairness.

Harriet's experiences as a mother, partner, and lesbian have greatly enhanced her teaching philosophy. They have taught her much about isolation, exclusion, and discrimination and about acceptance, togetherness and equity. Harriet’s openness to reading personal experience coupled with her artistic and athletic abilities have helped to motivate and guide her pedagogically. She says,

My interest is in getting the students to express themselves through visual arts or through movement, or drama, or dance. So it was so easy for me to incorporate everything into phys. ed. and art and I love the fact that I can supplement my program and help any other teachers with their subjects. It just seemed to synthesize...

When I asked about her thoughts on holistic education, she answered,

Well I think holistic is education and teaching that is meaningful or engaging, that students can connect their own experiences to and then build on them. I think unless...I can reach the musical learner, the intrapersonal learner, the kinesthetic learner, unless I can kind of hit the target ...it's a real tricky balance and I'm lucky because visual arts
incorporates expression. Any kind of media, any drawing, painting, sculpture, photography - I mean there's something there that every child likes or finds engaging. In phys. ed. there is something there that somebody, one student, all of the students are going to connect with, so movement in some way, dancing or skill sport or movement or anything from those two areas. Because I am that teacher, I find it’s natural for me to incorporate that into my teaching but ... if there’s not some sort of movement involved or visual arts component I find that you lose kids. But not every student is going to love visual arts, not every student is going to love phys. ed. but if you can, I try to plan so there’s some sort of element of movement, music, visual arts, than they’re more likely to participate with enthusiasm, just connect because that’s a natural hook for kids ...

She concluded her portrayal with the mention of gardening, working with soil and watching plants grow.

Presently Harriet is finishing her second year at this school and her teaching career has provided her with the reassurance she needs to manage challenges. She reflects on the hardships saying, “…some of the goals of year one are starting to become reality. I think it was a bumpy start because of the enormous amount of work that had to be done... just establishing the pseudo infrastructure and resources and set routines and just hammering out some of the imperfections.” Harriet not only describes the frustration brought on by these obstacles; she also explains how she manages to overcome them. She emphasizes the need to know yourself, develop confidence and trust, be in alignment with colleagues, and be an integral part of students learning. She exclaims, ideas and people come and go so finding “...that balance is holistic.”
LARK
It was an early morning when I met with Lark. She had squeezed in some errands beforehand and was catching her breath before she settled into the interview. Over the next hour she talked with ease as she shared her stories. Lark has been working for two years in an alternative school that is located in a recently gentrified neighbourhood of a large city. The community of two-and-three story homes is scattered with parks and on the cusp of a thoroughfare lined with trendy independent stores, health centres, markets and restaurants. The diverse population is of mixed income and there are many who are recent immigrants. The alternative school is two years old and is housed in an older, public school. The administration is shared between them. There are 155 students attending her school and the ratio of male to female students is equal. The grades span from junior kindergarten to grade seven with the largest cohort of children (74%) found at the primary level.

The schools’ mandate is written to include a holistic approach to teaching, and an environmental and social justice focus. Embedded in teachers’ programming are weekly opportunities for students to learn outdoors. They are an eco-school, offer itinerant music programs and have parents who volunteer weekly. This alternative public program grew from a community of parents who, as Lark states, “wanted an alternative to the regular public school system.” To be part of the public system and therefore publicly funded is less common for schools with a similar focus. They are more likely to be a privately run school such as Waldorf. So Lark wished to emphasize, “We are not an alternative to anything. We are in addition to and so we do have many claims that we are trying to slowly achieve and really bring to life.” She addresses this because her alternative school is not offering a radically new approach to learning. They are aiming to integrate new ideas (through a holistic lens) with the preexisting ones to expand the focus of academic learning beyond a traditional and standardized approach. They are striving to implement a pedagogy that supports the use of creative methods, which are open to varying perspectives.

Lark’s first position within the greater city public school board was a junior class that she managed quite comfortably. She enjoyed working most with a diverse
community of students. With music and art in her background, she liked to use methods that were creative and unconventional. She describes herself as compassionate and curious and “being willing and creative enough to make things work for kids,” and adds modestly “[of course reaching] not every single kid.” She humbly recognizes the depth a teacher must achieve in order to meet all students’ needs. Lark described a growing disinterest for teaching within a regular public school setting because of the emphasis on prescribed ways of knowing. She confides, “This isn’t going to inspire me enough” and continued to explain how she was drawn towards this new teaching opportunity. “So I heard about this school coming along and it did interest me. I knew if there was something special like this school coming around I would kick myself for not being part of it.” There was something more she wanted to achieve with her students that she could not in her current placement.

Lark mulled over the significance of transitioning but interestingly this deliberation brought on hesitation. She realized that the new school required her to put her beliefs at the forefront of her teaching and this made her feel slightly nervous. In the past this endeavor was one she either had to fight for or put at the wayside. Now she would be working with a collective of teachers who, as she put it, were “all really groovy” and this heightened admiration triggered insecurity. However, her excitement and motivation outweighed her doubts. She describes her immediate impression of the school as,

It was a very dynamic group organizing it. So there were these Waldorf background teachers, but very loose, not like dogmatic at all. It was that, that they wanted to get away from I guess. They wanted to share it with the public system. It wasn’t a matter of it being so rigid. It was like, let’s take inspiration from different places and I thought that was brilliant ... I mean we all do it but I guess when your appetites big and you reach far that’s when it gets different then the regular school.

She takes a minute to reflect and admits while nodding, “I’m on this serious learning curve.”

Although this new move was promising, it was challenging. This new position deepened the dynamics of her teaching because it incorporated a more personal
narrative that closely reflected her inner core. This shift in doing meant she would have to trust her internal sense, something she was not used to doing in a professional context. She was in a different space now, where she would be intentionally practicing her philosophy, moving beyond the traditional techniques of teaching, where her ideas would be valued and incorporated.

I asked about her view on holistic education. For Lark it is about how we flow between that which keeps us connected to each other, our environment and ourselves, including our soulful selves. She often makes reference to the soul during our interview. “Overall I guess I want to try to pull from the world things that are beautiful and really nourishing for the human soul. All the other needs can be met I find, easily enough with a mainstream type life. As long as you’re active you can stimulate your brain, your body, your feelings but it’s the soulful stuff that I’m most interested in.” She does not deny that teachers and students need to create a structured setting for learning with tensions that stretch thinking and challenge understanding. Lark describes how she uses both traditional and alternative approaches together. She supports creative exploration that comes from a spontaneous and imaginative place and values the practice of open-ended questioning. During the interview she recounted a lesson she taught wherein she incorporated the technique of guided imagery. She confesses that her lesson was not completely planned out and in the moment she had to gauge her students’ willingness to participate. She followed her instincts and taught the lesson. Based on performance and participation Lark felt she had reached depths she could not have predicted. At the conclusion of sharing this lesson with me, Lark voiced a wonder. Of what value would it be for students “…to know that you’ve got a sacred place inside you?” During the interview we paused here. Listening to her question, I reflected, what an incredible thought to consider. I have never heard a teacher ask this type of a question before. In the practice of holistic teaching, I wonder if, when a teacher contemplates the child’s ability to learn whole-fully, does it extend understanding to a greater level, to a more spiritual means of understanding?
Lark describes how she came to teaching saying, “So I was not a child who wanted to be a teacher. I was a person who did my honours in psychology and then I was living... looking for like a deep connection. So I was living [out east], living on the land and bar tending,” she says embarrassed and laughing. “So I could eat,” she stresses like there is a need to defend.

I started to do sweat lodges. I did sweats for two years with this Mi’kmaq guy and a bunch of people and I was playing music. I was making art and I was interested in cooking with my organic farming friends and artists and stuff. And I was like, how can I make ends meet and not be hustling all the time? Like, I don't want to hustle my music, or hustle art and I thought, wow I could be a teacher. Then I can do all of these things with a purpose... I also was very inspired to teach in a native community. So I ... got my B.Ed. in a year and then went north ... and taught at a First Nations [Reserve] for three years and that was all that I had really planned. I then came back because my son was born and reluctantly, very, very reluctantly took a job with a school board.

Lark spoke passionately about her experience. Her hands waved about, her face was expressive and she spoke with emphasis and emotion. I could hear from her stories how she was trying to push beyond her boundaries to create a larger space for learning, for her and her students. The on-the-job limitations she endures stretch from the rigidity of the curriculum to a lack of support and trust in collegial relations and they can be burdensome. But these struggles also help her to regain focus and restate her purpose and reaffirm her direction. I have wondered how Lark managed to overcome and not be too deterred by her struggles. I reason that she gets strength from the relationship she has with her students. Lark repeatedly mentions gauging her students' wellbeing. “I'm always aware of the psyche of the kids and I do tune into that to guide things.” She also tunes into herself regularly. “So I'm drawing on myself and how I develop myself. I do art. ... I like to rock. ... [My students] like that. I like to be in a state of reverence. I like to be where I'm excited, where I'm amazed.” Through self-reflection and tuning into her students Lark can feel what is of most value to her as a teacher. This reflective process is what she has grown to trust. She states, “Like if I put a lot into [teaching] then ... I can get a lot from them and it's just a living thing.” Learning, like being, is a living thing.
RAINE
Raine was welcoming and shared her story with a tone soft in its directness. Raine has been teaching at the primary level for most of her career but more specifically for two years at the same alternative school as Lark. She first learned about the alternative school in the winter of 2009 through the parents in the surrounding community. Her curiosity grew when she learned that the vision had a basis in holistic philosophy and environmental education. This philosophy, the backbone of the school was of significant interest to Raine. She felt it brought something new and healthy to teaching that allowed learning to be nurtured within the whole child. Raine describes her attraction to this particular school as,

I’ve always been interested in trying to expand and work and develop with children on the emotional side ‘cause that’s very much about what I am personally tuning into, emotion and our spirit – spiritually developing and tapping into kids energy in that way and that always has interested me... When I heard that this school was into yoga and meditation and talking about different kinds of energies I just thought oh, this is the school for me. Where I didn’t have to follow the academic, strict academics of the school board. I could allow kids to play and use their imaginations. That is what I was ready for ... allowing them to nurture and play, want to tell stories and then being ready to read and write. So that’s what I think attracted me to it and also the people I would be working with. They were alternative in the ways that they were thinking and in the ways that they would be teaching. That really attracted me because I knew that those kinds of people would be open, positive, and growing and attuned to nurturing people not the academics but creatively encouraging them to co-create.

During years of teaching in regular public schools, Raine developed a deeply felt idea for how she truly desired to teach. In her previous positions the emphasis of her teaching had been on meeting curriculum expectations and although this was relevant, it was not inspirational enough. Raine felt her focus needed to go beyond students’ intellectual capacity. She also wanted to reach the emotional and physical capacities. Throughout Raine’s interview she describes the inherent value of exploring within nature and expressing through movement. Teaching felt shallow and artificial if she could not honour this need. So, to Raine’s delight, she found a current alternative school that supported this. Her excitement was overwhelming when she met a community whose language and actions reflected hers. Connections
she made with the staff provided her with the foundation she needed to teach in the way she desired - to teach in an imaginative, creative and open-ended style. In reflection she considers how she used to teach and firmly states: “I don’t think I would ever want to go back to the old way …”

At the onset of her career Raine was uncertain about becoming a teacher. However, after finishing her university degree and under the influence of her peers, she did apply to teachers college. Ultimately, she was keenly inspired to continue with teaching. Before Raine firmly planted her heels into the Canadian classroom she participated in two over-seas teaching projects that took her to South America and Asia in the 90’s. Between these journeys she spent some time teaching in Canada. It was during her time away that she really developed herself personally and professionally. Through meaningful introspection Raine deepened her sense of experiential learning and now she can attest to how it helped lay the foundation for her current involvement in spiritual work. Self-reflection as a technique for learning is critical to personal development and Raine discussed how this awareness encouraged her to use this form of processing with her students. She recognized that developing as a teacher and developing as a person was a blended process. So the spiritual work she undergoes reflects on both her professional skills and interpersonal skills. Raine shares a turning point for her that took place in 2007. This excerpt from the interview depicts how positive recognition gave her continued support.

But then I would say probably more when I came back [from overseas] and started teaching yoga in the classroom because somebody actually acknowledged, ‘hey, teaching yoga to kids is a good thing’ and then that just kind of opened up a portal for me and I just kind of started there. That whole teaching of yoga wasn’t until 2007. It’s just recent that all this spirituality has come into the forefront for me because as the world is shifting, the consciousness is shifting to allow for people to express themselves more openly. Whereas before, no … people weren’t ready to receive that kind of information and that kind of voice. You just couldn’t do it. It’s kind of been an organic shift with my own personal development. That’s what’s important to me as I age. This school allows it and encourages it.
Raine pondered the idea of teaching with a holistic philosophy and described it as embodied learning, to feel, to be what you are learning. Key to Raine’s teaching approach is a student being able to move within nature. For her, being situated in the natural environment and feeling one’s connection to everything around is most significant. She attempts to enhance their comprehension and extend their knowing by incorporating all their senses. For example she engages her students’ interest and imagination through oral story telling. Students reflect on the story by participating in activities that include: verbal discussion, artistic developments through drawing, crafts, and music; kinesthetic learning that involves drama, yoga and movement techniques that take place both in and outdoors; and the emergence of writing and math activities. Through the integration of nature and imagination students make insights that can transform their understanding. Raine describes,

So from that story I’ll take ideas and go with them in other areas of the curriculum. I’ll ... take a story about animals and we’ll act them out in yoga postures. We’ll pretend to be those animals or we’ll go into their sounds and what they look like and really get the kids immersed in the characters so when I’m telling the story they become the actors in the story and they’ve got the language. I have them practicing lines in the story then ... they are developing the voice of the characters. So they’re really immersed in the story and they’re really into acting it out and [they] have a really good understanding of the story. Then we’re outside playing games that have to do with that story line or we’ll create that animal maybe through sewing or maybe through some kind of visual art or math. We will tie in sticks or stones or ... Whatever natural elements that were in the story, I try to bring out through the rest of the play.

Raine was enthusiastic about the positive changes that have taken place in her career and did not dwell on the shortcomings. She spent some time discussing her frustration with leadership and a lack of professional development, as well as some difficulties in other areas. However she met these challenges with a willingness to work through them. Supportive dialogue with the staff and community provided her with the energy needed to overcome these obstacles. Raine expressed high appreciation for the volunteers who have come in to tell stories to students, and conduct Qi Gong lessons and focusing activities for teachers.
Raine said notably: “There are some, many amazing parents that come and work with us. I couldn't do it without them.” Raines says, watching her peers teach, watching students interact and watching parents’ get involved has been inspirational for her.

Raine does not divide her personal and professional selves. Her participation in activities, courses and workshops is beyond a professional obligation; it taps into her personal interests. Her involvement in yoga, felting, outdoor education, Waldorf, brain gym and an overseas Reggio Ameila project are some examples as to how she extends herself. Raine stated, “Everything I do I pull it back to my kids.” As a person, who she is as a teacher, a learner, her philosophy is practiced all the time. It isn’t something that is only turned on within the school walls. This is how she lives.

The inclusiveness she feels towards teaching is also how she regards learning. Raine suggests there is a need for more students to have access to this type of schooling and at the conclusion of the interview states: “I felt fulfilled in what I [did] but I really do love what I am doing right now - it really fuels my tank. It doesn’t seem like work ’cause it’s just an extension of who I am personally. I feel really privileged. I want to be part of the school and work with people committed. We need more programs kids can access. It should not be a lottery.”
Cherie
For the last eight years I have been working in an elementary public school that is attended by more than 550 students. The staff is comprised of teachers and educational assistants who teach grades from junior kindergarten to grade 8. The neighbourhood is up and coming and gentrifying and also known as a centre for the Polish community. It is close-knit and has an artsy appeal. Members are of mixed income and ethnically diverse. The school building is located between two parks: a community park with a play apparatus, baseball diamond and open field where once a week an organic market is held and the other is a municipal park. This area holds gardens, a zoo, play and sporting grounds, a stage and educational facilities. A block away from the school is a commercial street composed of stores, businesses, health centres, churches, and a library. The relationship we have with this enriched neighbourhood greatly enhances us in our teaching.

Our program includes extended French for junior and senior students and French Immersion for all primary grades. Parent council is an active body implementing initiatives that include fundraising and visiting artists. As well they help with school activities such as senior graduation and the eco-club that works to maintain our eco platinum status. Our focus emphasizes equity, the arts, extra-curricular activities, and the social and academic development of students.

I began my teaching career in Guyana in special education. Returning to Canada, I then taught in an inner-city school, also in special education. Other than seeking a teaching position there was nothing in particular that called me to my current school. Teachers did not address a holistic vision to educating students. So to help cultivate my own philosophy I watched and listened to other teachers and I was intrigued by a particular few. I gravitated to those who emphasized co-operative and creative elements like art, drama, movement, and story telling and who handled classroom management in proactive ways. The efforts of these teachers were compassionate, reflective, or holistic although they would not have identified them as such. I found their attitude open and trusting towards students. They were not holding themselves back with worry about compromising academic integrity or maintaining classroom authority. They were going for it! They were
going for what they saw as really meaningful. So as a senior special education teacher I began building relationships with these teachers by sharing the teaching experiences we resonated with, learned from, and together found inspiring.

What has grown clearer in my understanding is how student engagement increases when these creative methods are fused with traditional academic practices. Increased engagement can take the lesson in an unplanned direction and learning to feel comfortable with this was a challenge. But as my comfort level increased with experience I moved from seeing pedagogy as an instrument that supported two independent curriculums - traditional and alternative, to an instrument that supported the two combined - an interdependent, holistic curriculum. I consistently began to blend the use of visuals, art, music, drama, mind journeying, story telling, and nature into my lessons. Oral participation included sharing personal reflections and points of view as well as questions. I structured time into the schedule for student guided talk sessions. During the week we had a yoga/movement/relaxation period and a community-building period. How each year unfolds is based on variables such as: students’ interests, abilities, curiosity and the class’s community rapport.

The interviews conducted for this study centered around five themes. Participants described their holistic perspective and their current views on lesson planning and delivery, assessment, obstacles, and supports. For me, key to teaching holistically is being emotionally attuned to my surroundings. Critical thinking pushes learning, which engages our full human potential. If I refuse to be mindful of my emotional sensibility while teaching, likely I will create shallow, static, and mundane learning experiences. Experiential learning is often lost within fast paced, goal-oriented conditions because the emotional attunement that is part of the process involves slowing down in order for feelings to resonate through the body. The impact of rich learning, then, is actually felt in the quality of our processing. Temperate and considerate communicating allows us to notice the subtle and quiet emotional indications from an interaction that best inform our thinking and guide a wise use of time. In teaching students to deepen their awareness, I too need to focus
on deepening my own awareness. This can only happen if I’m open to transcending my assumptions, which I have learned is quite a courageous act.

Lesson planning and delivery is a craft, a process that is both methodical and creative. The methodical aspect asks me to be prepared and the creative aspect asks me to be ready. When composing a lesson I think about the curriculum expectations and desired outcomes, the level of students’ abilities, their area of needs and strengths, their learning styles, interests and the logistics of the class.

Day-to-day lessons vary. Generally I aim to have an intellectual hook. To help capture their interest I raise a point of inquiry, incorporate visuals or use depictions the students can relate to. I also focus on having an interactive component. I inspire stimulation by using music, art, drama or movement, visualization, outside activity, a game based on subject material, a jigsaw puzzle, group work or pair share. I find it important to provide time for initial sharing of previous experience when a new topic is introduced. At the closing of a lesson they consolidate their problem solving and ask new questions. During each lesson I monitor their participation, their involvement, and the overall atmosphere. Thinking and feeling my way through what I see and hear provides me with a sense for how to best continue.

Even with my lesson mapped out I have to be ready for changes that can be triggered by external interruptions, in class behaviour that upsets the flow, struggles with problem solving, or inquisitiveness. Many changes can redirect me from my plans; so knowing this requires me to be flexible and creative. The causes for change can sometimes feel frustrating but if I am properly prepared I can rely on my intuition and problem solving skills to get me through. This being said, my ability to respond mindfully does not always happen as I wish it would. Some challenges can be sudden or overwhelming and I have had to learn to promptly recognize these moments so I can sooner step back and respond in the moment.

The topic of assessment is quite convoluted. Assessment tools and evaluation are not holistic in and of themselves. But that doesn’t warrant throwing assessment out as a viable learning option. It is part of the learning process and significant to
helping students develop self-awareness. Unfortunately, standardized testing has negatively impacted the purpose and results of assessment because the focus of teaching has shifted to using quantifiable methods that emphasize the prescribing of specific outcomes, leveled rubrics, and success criteria statements, which limit creativity and choice. Testing is a rigid process, however it can be beneficial. Its pivotal role is instrumental to informing both the student and the teacher. Reflection on the product and feedback helps to inform process and properly direct further learning.

Relaying this understanding to students can be challenging. Students see marks and grades, as final and this can be daunting for them. Responses like, “You are always marking us, even when you’re not” or “I am doing this for the grade” leads me to question just exactly how testing is informing my students about their own learning. The process of testing can cause great anxiety or apathy, which ultimately encumbers the student’s performance. Teachers can address this concern openly with their students to help alleviate their stress levels. Assessment strategies I like to use are conferencing (individually or in groups), reflection (oral or written) and student portfolios.

Working in a school that does not incorporate a holistic focus has its challenges, which can be discouraging. Colleagues, administrators, and parents who are not of like-mind pose opinions they strongly defend and that can thwart a collaborative process. The role of standardized testing has dictated a strict and prescribed delivery of the curriculum expectations, making teaching less dynamic. Students can also bring challenges that are inconsistent with class rapport and community. Furthermore, I too, can be an obstacle. It is my responsibility to reflect on our processes and to bring a healthy level of energy by caring for myself appropriately. These various forms of conflict can have a negative impact on my level of self-trust and faith.

On the flip side there are many forms of support to help me. Parents who volunteer and offer resources or feedback that is constructive is validating. My
administrator who is approachable and listens and believes in the merit of my
teaching is encouraging. A strategy that really helps is collaborating with colleagues,
friends, and my life partner, people who can help me develop an honest outlook so I
can aptly problem-solve. Working with a network of worthy connections is how I
stay true and steadfast to my philosophy.

Also, I aim to take care personally and professionally by saving time for
activities that I feel are reenergizing. Such activities include: meditation, reading,
physical activity, creative endeavors, outdoor trips, gardening, courses of study and
believe it or not house cleaning. Time with friends and family and on my own is
important. Lastly, I ponder the feeling of rightness a teachable moment brings.
These spontaneous times bring the students and I into something undeniably
meaningful. Another thing I do is recognize how intuition will often guide me
smoothly through an interruption that I assumed would upset my lesson. I also
strive to accept the idea that lessons are ‘in-the-making’ and perfectly unfold, as
they are meant to. I’ll remember times when a student voices delight during an a-ha
moment of deepened understanding or I’ll think about students who are engaged
and surprisingly take the initiative, ask insightful questions or act in inspiring ways.
Reflecting on these brief moments are often reenergizing and reaffirming.
CHAPTER 5

Interview Responses

Theme one: Holistic Perspective

Shayne describes her perspective like this, “I think a holistic perspective would be opening up your mind to recognizing that kids learn in lots of different ways and that kids need a variety of experiences to demonstrate what they know and demonstrate their learning. ...So I feel like, the word that comes is, the whole child, honouring the whole child. The emotional intelligence, the academic intelligence, the social intelligence, like all the different parts that help kids to be successful at school because you can be academic smart but if you don’t know how to disagree respectfully with someone, or if you don’t know how to set a goal, or you don’t have that motivation or that perseverance, its going to have a huge impact on your academic success. So I feel like holistic education is just being open to multiple points of entry and multiple ways of honouring the diversity in your class.”

Harriet explains, “Well, I think holistic is education and learning that is meaningful or engaging, that students can connect their own experiences to, and then build on them.” Harriet describes the importance of needing to “hit the target” and offer support that is aimed at meeting the student’s ability. She says, “There’s something there that every child likes or finds engaging” and refers to such options as drawing, painting, sculpting, photography, dancing, and physical education. She finds if she doesn’t add in elements of art she is likely to “lose kids”. Harriet talks about gauging her student’s anticipation and enthusiasm and firmly believes that the arts are “a natural hook for kids”. She explains, “It’s just, the trends in education, it goes out and in, out and in and [finding] that balance is holistic. It is trying to appeal to the multiple intelligences...”

Important to Raine is the idea of being open, positive, growing, and being attentive to nurturing people. She talks about tuning into emotion and spirit – spiritually
developing and tapping into kids energy. The Waldorf approach has supported Raine with implementing the curriculum expectations and launching her ideas using the arts and nature. She uses oral storytelling, yoga postures and drama techniques. Drama helps students feel learning and also see from the perspective of the character. She recounts a time when she told a story that involved a hedgehog named Hedgy. The students asked what is a hedgehog and what does it look like. After discussion, Raine had the students move into child’s pose to enact the hedgehog. Raine adds, “Then when we’re outside [we] maybe play games that have to do with that storyline or we’ll create that animal through sewing or maybe through some kind of visual art or math. We will tie in ...natural elements that were in the story.” She believes that by embodying the character her students enrich their understanding and this she finds is holistic. She explains, “So they’re really immersed in the story and they’re really into acting it out and have a really good understanding of the story.”

Lark feels that her school is a ‘fertile environment for holistic practice to grow’ and is appreciative that this focus can overcome boundaries that usually stop it. When describing her perspective of holistic education she talks about involving the creative arts to help develop academic skills. She explains that while in the throws of creativity she keeps in mind the value of learning basic skills and she says it is important to measure things sometimes. She states: “So, yes I have homework. Yes, I have ‘Math Makes Sense’ and all that. Yah, I see that kids like things to push up against. If it’s just like let’s explore, then the river runs dry.” She considers how she can ‘work with the tension between form and [fluidity]’ and provides a metaphor to explain, “Like I mean, here’s the pole. [Now] grow little tomato plant up around (instead of on the ground rotting).” At the conclusion of her interview she restates, “I think it’s important, once the boundaries of what is acceptable to teach are completely blown open ...it’s very important to find balance.” She emphasizes that keeping in line with a vision is important “because when the love starts flowing it can get wild and then there’s just too much material that is uncontained. It can get emotions, spirit, [and] body, like holistically uncontained.”
Theme two: Lesson Planning and Delivery

Shayne describes her feelings about the Reggio approach. She explains that this approach requires a teacher to “...follow the kids wherever they want to go and trust that you’re going to meet all the expectations that you’re going to need to meet”. Then responds, “That requires the teachers are comfortable being uncomfortable not knowing, not my strength but definitely something I wanna work towards.” Her previous teaching experience at the private school provides her with some insight. She explains, “I taught at a private school, which was alternative... and I think that really informed the way I teach.... the curriculum was very organic... They had a very different approach. They had a lot of freedom, a lot of flexibility...it was also very creative. So I think I’m trying to see how much of that I can bring into the public school system...” Shayne continues, “I’m sort of holding both the vision and the curriculum expectations at the same time.”

Lark, explores Waldorf programming when developing her lessons. “I do find many things that [Waldorf teachers] do, especially with art, to be really worthwhile. I’ve just recently taken on trying to incorporate a little chunk of this form [drawing] into my program... And what I did is started noticing so many things. This is part of the point of doing form drawing. I started noticing patterns everywhere...” Lark stated, “I’m not interested in chasing trends around... I just want to get to the core thing that might... give me the little essence of the wisdom.” There are many new ideas presented to educators every year. Lark receives direction from Waldorf or from professional development workshops but before applying suggestions she sifts through them for significance. She is interested in supporting learning that takes students inwards and helps them develop inner awareness.

Raine explains, “What I’ve taken from the Waldorf approach is the story of the day or the story of the week.” She describes how one lesson developed after telling the story, “The Mitten”. Her example illustrates how she combines creativity with structure. “They were the characters. We got under this little white rug I had and they had these little masks from the story and they got under the mitten and I had
one child actually take over as the narrator as the week went on. Another child was a set assistant and they helped the kids get into [position] and then we made a little book. Again I had pictures for them and they glued the pictures into the book and they took the books home and practiced the story in the classroom with me and in pairs. Like sometimes they would be the one animal and the other animal would be their partner. They would practice having the voice of the animal and what they animal would say in the story…"

Shayne describes how she has students interactively engaged when focused on a math concept. She also weaves in both creativity and structure. “When I’m building centres [I] have to think about the different smarts. So one was for building, so for body smart: building a structure and measuring it. One was going on a measurement hunt around the classroom, drawing and writing about what [they] discovered. One was in the sandbox filling containers for capacity. Another one was making plasticine bears and weighing them on the scale and comparing the weight. And then the other one was covering an area with pattern blocks and then having an opportunity to write about that.”

Lark describes how she also finds a balance between the two. She talks about the importance of spelling and the need for learning multiplication. She explains, a teacher can do ‘groovy’ stuff in math that is really interesting but “…if the same kids in the group are the one’s doing the math, having the skills, these skills aren’t growing [for everyone then].” Skills can develop in both structured and creative situations but an integration of the two she feels works best. So on one hand, she can plan for math ‘boot camp’ and on the other, she can plan for a math arts-based activity. She describes a lesson based on the artist Andy Goldsworthy. Students worked on a project where they watched a clip of his movie. They observed his work and completed an eco-art project that involved taking a trip to the neighbourhood beach and creating sculptures. They reflected on the displays. Pictures were taken and compiled into a calendar with the help of parents.
Harriet’s professional background is in teaching visual arts, which taps into her drive to creatively explore. "My interest is in getting students to express themselves through visual arts, or through movement, or drama, dance...” She finds that student’s understanding reaches a deeper level when learning is stimulated through artistic endeavor. “I think over time there are trends in education and unfortunately there have been trends where rote learning is the focus. My experience is if you put something to music or if you have actions like signs then kids will remember it.” Her lesson development and delivery is largely based on her student’s ability and their input. She refers to the types of learners and students’ level of interest. When Harriet plans her lesson the ministry expectations are only a launch for her so she can target them in the report card. She states, “So it’s trying to balance the needs of the students and I don’t think it’s balanced with the curriculum.” She takes into account the curriculum expectations but her priority is to guide meaningful and critical learning at their level of ability.

Raine is keen on students working with their imagination. She says, “I could allow kids to play and use their imaginations. That is what I was ready for... Allowing them to nurture and play, want to tell stories, and then be ready to read and write.” Raine tunes into the emotional and spiritual aspects of learning. “I’ve always been interested in trying to expand, [to] work and develop with children on the emotional side...” When Lark recalled her lesson involving a labyrinth she ended her story by expressing the value in students’ knowing “...that you’ve got a sacred place inside you.” She pondered, “I think if I’d been taught something like that...it would have helped me.”

Similarly to Harriet, Lark taps into her artistic ability when teaching. She sees learning through a creative lens and is excited by being able to freely blend imaginative flow with defining structure. “And so I feel like the more notes I can hit out of the regular program of what’s expected and what’s considered legitimate the more wild crazy stuff I can do.”
Lark also spoke about working with a group of natural outdoor educators. The Pine Project is an organization run by staff that takes students outside routinely over the course of the year to deepen their connection with the natural world. “So it can be done by exploring, playing, identifying medicinals and edibles, tracking – increasing awareness so there’s a relationship with the natural world.” Lark said thoughtfully that the interaction with nature is about “the love and seeing the rightness of being taken care of” while in connection.

Raine emphasizes movement. She attended a “Brain Gym” workshop and implemented these techniques into her lessons. Raine believes that learning is extended while in movement. She states, “I’m ensuring that my kids have moved... Sometimes its free play, sometimes it’s me doing a lesson with them, connecting them with nature or just letting them play and enjoy nature.” She continues, “Then I bring them in for stories and songs and circle. When it’s nice weather we’re outside sitting in a stump circle. My stories are all oral...sometimes it will be with props, sometimes the kids will be props, they’ll be the actors.”

Regarding physical activity, Raine also mentions handwork. “We all try to teach the children how to do different handcrafts like finger knitting and sewing with... real needles, felting... I’m actually personally stretching myself to learn how to sew and knit so I can do these things for fine motor strengthening. The kids love it. It is so grounding as well and we’re hoping to develop gardens as well.”

Social skills were also considered when delivering lessons. Shayne emphasized her interest in building community by focusing on cooperative learning strategies. So with her students they generated a list that identified what working together looks, sounds, and feels like, and each week they focused on a different skill. She explained, “One of the skills...is listening attentively. So then you break down that skill, what does this look like? When we’re doing pair work we check in and say, how well do you feel your partner listened to you? How does it feel when you are being listened to?”
Raine explained the staff plans to introduce two new activities rooted in examining social values. The activities will be led by both teachers and grandfathers from the community and will focus on positive character qualities. The initiative led by grandfathers is influenced by native tradition. Students will learn about values through the adventure of an animal character in a story.

Conflict-resolution was another point of focus. Shayne described a way for building strong community relationships through peace circles. She ran peace circles to help students communicate their feelings, take emotional risks, and sensitively problem solve. Her aim was to support them in reflection and reinforce the idea of taking responsibility for their actions. She centred on making choices and making changes. She says it’s important for them to see “…that we all make mistakes and that we all need to be forgiven and we can do repair.”

Harriet draws attention to values such as, cooperation and teamwork. She described a conflict in her physical education class. “... there was something that was just not working with the game we were playing and I had to stop it because it just was, it was too negative. And they were becoming really competitive and angry because we were working with points. I just thought, you know, this is not a positive experience for everybody.” She addressed her students saying, “I think we need to talk about it and take a step back and look at our own behaviour.”

Shayne looks at ways to incorporate social justice and equity into her lessons. She created ‘Community Unity’ which is a whole school meeting for teachers and students where through a democratic process concerns are raised, decisions are made, and voting takes place. With a colleague she also worked to create lessons about gender. “We created a weeks worth of curriculum around gender roles, gender stereotypes, transphobia, and homophobia.”

When possible, Harriet incorporates a social justice perspective into her lessons. She begins, “In grade one the science curriculum is about seasons. ... so I explored it through migration. And the social justice aspect that I could pull into it was when we were talking about migration. We’re learning all about birds. Then we take another
step and ask the questions why can’t people migrate? What makes it difficult for people to migrate?” They discussed the idea of boundaries and legal issues. “... we get into issues of social justice... So I don’t even have to explain how intuitive kids will think about that. Like, wow, ‘that’s right! We aren’t free to move back and forth. Why?’ Then they start asking those questions and that’s where inquiry comes in. And so, how we find the answers is also where I am the guide and I steer them toward the resources to help them answer their own questions.”

I also asked the participants about their level of flexibility during lesson delivery. When pondering flexibility Shayne talked about two scenarios. First she notes the value in being “open to allowing the kids to tell you what they need or where they need to go.” She explains, “I feel like I do a lot of planning in advance. So I feel really clear about where I need to get the kids at the end of grade 1 or at the end of a unit. But I think that if you want to honour the experience of the students in the classroom you have to be willing to follow their lead.... In a lesson its really easy to see if kids aren’t getting it, you know you need to go back and re-teach, that’s obvious” or as she says later on, “slow down or change direction the next day.” She describes the second situation, “Or you have a lesson planned but the kids come back from recess and there is a big problem and you realize, throw that lesson out the window because this lesson is going to be about unpacking the problem and problem solving together.”

Harriet pondered her willingness to being flexible. She remembers conducting a review of students’ portfolios. Students were asked to select five pieces from their collections and reflect on them. While she reviewed samples of work using one student’s portfolio, a student called out, “Oh, I don’t really remember that project.” A second student requested, “You know, you were showing us that students work, can you show my work?” The teacher then said, “They all wanted to share. They wanted to see. They wanted me to lead that discussion or that kind of sharing circle and it made so much more sense to me. But I just didn’t think of it when I was planning.” Harriet continued, “...that totally changed the direction of the lesson and I didn’t of
course have time to do everybody so they wanted to continue in the next class. And I learned a lot from that…”

**Raine described two situations that depicted both the challenging and beneficial aspects of flexibility. She said, “...last year was really hard for me because I would have a plan and then my teaching partner would come in and she would just totally change it right there and then, on the spot, that morning. ...it was hard for me but I learned a lot about just being spontaneous and going with the weather because when the weather is nice you forget about your indoor plan and you just spend the day outside. In fact when it snowed this week... I said forget being inside we’re going to be outside and we’re going to explore the snow.” Another example she shared was about deciding to do a performance in front of the school with a class from another grade that had been coincidentally working on a similar theme. This was not a preplanned event.**

**Lark responded, “It could be a matter of something appearing not to be working and I might just pull out something else to try to get the point across or to bring life to whatever’s happening. Let’s say in math. It could be like a story pops up and then the story ends up taking a really long time and so it gets bumped back to another day. There have been times actually where we’ll be drawing labyrinths. We were just doing this little art study on labyrinths while studying ancient Greece. I’m like, ‘okay, let’s go to the yoga room...and I said lie down and then I just did this creative visualization about going into a labyrinth. So I didn’t sit at home planning it... I thought oh, let’s go around the labyrinth and we’ll come out and have something to write about, what did you see in there... but then it turned into them like going deep into this ‘Persephone’ type place, like going down and then coming back... It was wild and like I couldn’t have planned that you know...”**
Theme three: Assessment

This year Shayne was involved in a TPA (Teacher Performance Appraisal) and she put a lot of thought into how she would present her methods. “So I was really thinking about the evidence that I was going to provide.” Administrators, for the purpose of monitoring and evaluating the performance of teachers, run this task. Lark adds to this stressing that she creates ‘airtight’ lessons, which are creative lessons that meet specific curriculum expectations. “You might be doing “it” [teaching according to Ministry guidelines] without even knowing these terms because you naturally feel it. But now that everything is so scripted, frighteningly scripted, where, it’s like, my god, who is this for? Like, I’d be better off having no ideas of my own and then just administering this stuff. ...It’s all about answering to these standards. Answering to how well you’re achieving these standards. I guess it’s bringing up the marks, I don’t know. ...BUT it doesn’t give me a good feeling. Like viscerally. I can feel it just talking about it right now. So that’s why I want to be airtight. I want to be able to say we rock!”

The responses varied concerning the demonstration of student learning. On one hand, Raine felt, ”Really, I would love if these kids didn’t have to represent... I think if you just allow them to do everything orally and move and sing and dance and use their bodies then when they get to grade one they’re going to be ready. They’re going to be full of different ways of creating and comprehending. They’ll want to get into it. Where as, I think sometimes when we make them sit down and try to write things or read they’re just not ready, they don’t want to do it.” On the other hand, Lark feels assessing is relevant. She figuratively expresses, “the sky’s the limit” and to get there she firmly believes students must measure and reflect in order to hone their skills. “But we also need to attend to, and I don’t mind at all because I can’t see how a person could do without their basic skills at being good and stuff, things being measured sometimes.” Shayne believes that assessing techniques need to be diverse and suggests that it is counterproductive for learning if we use only one technique. She refers to the ‘pencil-paper’ task and says, “We need kids to write. But
I think if that’s the only form of assessment you’re using than I just think you are going to miss a lot of great ideas."

EQAO is a test directed at a specific learning style and Shayne points out that there is a discrepancy between how one learns in an interdependent, interactive environment and how one is tested in an independent and non-collaborative environment. “…I have problems with the EQAO because the EQAO is a written standardized test and I don’t think it accurately reflects what kids know about these ideas. And if we’re going to give kids all kinds of opportunities to use manipulatives and hands on materials, and work in groups and then you’re going to throw a test at them, I think that it doesn’t honour their experience of learning that they’ve had up until that moment. I just think you have to give kids multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning and I think a pencil paper task is limited in terms of what you’re going to get.” Harriet’s view of the EQAO test is this, “My perspective is, I don’t believe in EQAO testing and I don’t think that it is healthy for kids. I’ve been involved in conversations around the moderated marking of the EQAO and I know that there’s differences even within the people marking it. I find that everything we have learned in, well, from P.D. (professional development) to teacher’s college, is counter intuitive to what that test is.” She believes that international pressure and indirect pressure from the business community is the basis for this type of testing. “…I remember the term we will never “teach to the test” and we are now “teaching to the test”. …In the 10 or 12 years... [the EQAO test] has changed so many times and they’re just never satisfied.” Lark discusses pressure derived from EQAO results. She suggests that the push for teachers to participate in critical pathways and various programs is for improving EQAO scores. This push however, can lead teachers to making “poor decisions,” decisions that are not meeting the true needs of students. Lark says regrettably, EQAO results bring legitimacy to teaching. “That’s the sad thing. It’s the one measure that any body takes any notice of...”

Harriet finds that providing specific marks and grades leads to unhealthy competition. “I think personally I am not a big fan of pencil paper tests. I find that the students become really competitive... – it’s more mark driven. It’s not quantity
or the quality of the work, it becomes just about the marks. And it’s interesting because we were – we don’t give out report cards they have to be requested and I find that at the interviews more parents took them or looked at them at least [from what] I expected. My understanding was that the parent community was really against report cards, really against grades. I find parents are very similar to the kids when the grades are presented. They become competitive and you know, the questions in their mind are always well, why didn’t they get an “A” or what do they need to get an “A”? In our system a “B” is meeting expectations. So I think it’s leading people to the wrong assumption that an “A” is, you know, the good student, when a “B” is expectation.”

For the most part, the participants felt negatively about standardized testing and standardized reporting. In reference to the report card, Raine confesses, “I’m pretty lucky. Our report cards are still anecdotal. I don’t have to give grades. I just write about what the children’s strengths are, their needs, next steps but I know that for my colleagues it’s challenging.” Harriet reveals, “I find that they (administration) want them very, very personal... So I need to make sure that part is covered and have a solid concrete example and a really exciting culminating task and next steps for phys. ed. and art.”

Shayne was questioning, “How can I write report cards in a way that will reflect the values of the school?” She is pleased with the recent change in the report card that emphasizes the section on learning skills and next steps. Shayne feels that the ministry is shifting in their focus to emphasizing formative assessment rather the summative and she states, “So I love the new report card. I feel like the new report card is really sending a clear message to us about the direction were supposed to be going in because the learning skills and work habits, the space to write about those skills are just as big as the curriculum expectation skills. So I’m trying to really focus and justify my curriculum by saying I need to teach perseverance and independence and collaboration. ... I spend a lot of time teaching to those skills as I’m teaching to the curriculum.”
Harriet’s feels that the report card marks should not be the primary focus for a parent-teacher interview. “I don’t know, I kind of like an interview that doesn’t involve academics necessarily. The first interview, I like to talk about the students social skills and just behaviour in general.” Shayne feels the report card needs to directly reflect the student’s voice and how she achieves this is by including their personal views. “In my report card this term I included the goals. So, in the new year I’d set four goals with the students and they were a combination of academic goals and sort of social goals and we also made an action plan. So I wrote those goals right into the report card and I used their words so it really had, really had their voice in it. ... It felt like it fit into the new report card but was a way that I could be a bit more inclusive of student voices.”

When working with primary students Shayne is however concerned about the negative impact on students by setting up success criteria and levels of achievement. “So I’m trying to figure out what it looks like in Grade one because in Grade one you’re trying so hard to support kids to feel good about themselves as learners. I don’t know how helpful it is to hold up, to have a poster of here’s what a level 1 looks like, a level 2, level 3, level 4... Developmentally, grade one is this huge range and I want kids to feel empowered and confident and I don’t think they would be if I said, if I held up that DRA level 18 and said, ‘well you’re only successful at the end of grade one if you can read this story’. Because that takes away from all the, their whole journey and all the progress that they’ve made. So I’m struggling to figure out how to bring the two together. But I feel like the new report card and the direction that we’re going in...[represents] a shift on a ministry level.”

Aside from writing the report card, the staff at Shayne’s school is in the process of creating protocol around report card distribution. There was agreement amongst teachers and parents to put it straight into the OSR instead of sending it home. But due to the recent report card changes made to learning skills and next steps, Shayne is rethinking this decision. “Shayne relays a conversation she had with colleagues and then I said, ‘well what a missed opportunity because at the end of the year or even in your report cards when you’re writing about next steps and things you want
families to focus on - parents [wouldn’t be] reading that’. I said, ‘well, why am I putting all this energy into writing a document that no one’s going to read!’ So I disagree with the idea of not sending the report card home and I said as much.”

**Observing and listening, conferencing and documenting are strategies Raine uses to assess.** “I just sit down and I’ll ask them, like where they are in their alphabet. Like I have checklists and stuff and I sit down [with them] ... looking at letters. But I sometimes have them do performance tasks or I just observe them. I write down whether or not they’re interacting when its time to tell a story, if they’re successful, if they can. They feel confident, that’s mostly where I get my assessment from, observation.” Harriet referred to the term “gauging”. As teachers observe and listen they are informally assessing the student’s response. Harriet is aware that to teach effectively she needs to gauge her students’ involvement. “I try to gauge the students and that’s when I have to pull back or let them explore. If there is something more they want to explore we will continue with it. I have to gauge the students and the passion…”

**Shayne says that her aim this year** “… is to do a lot more self-reflection and goal setting... I’m also trying to use goal setting and generate success criteria with the students so that they are measuring themselves against themselves as opposed to measuring themselves against a standardized level of achievement. What I like about that is that everyone can feel successful and that students will then have a sense of ownership because they’ve developed the criteria that they’re measuring themselves against and they can also identify their own strengths and areas for growth.”

**Shayne addresses goal-setting saying,** “So we set these writing goals in the fall and then what I did when I had a small group was, we flipped through our journals and every time we met that goal we found a sample of writing where we were achieving that goal. We put a post-it note on it. So then you can see in a very concrete way all these moments that you’ve met your goal. When you have lots of post it notes its time to create a new goal and then we also stapled a piece of paper inside our
journal that said this is an example of good writing, this is why, and this is what I know about good writers.”

Shayne feels teaching students how to reflect is critical to students understanding themselves as learners. Shayne provides opportunities for students to reflect on their academic and social abilities. She explains, “I chose four habits of mind and I asked the grade ones to look through their samples of work that we had created together and to choose a piece of work that reflected each one of those four and staple that paper to it. One was thinking about our thinking, so meta-cognition. One was problem solving. One was perseverance and one was becoming independent. So I chose those four because I felt they were really relevant for grade one. And so I gave them a piece of paper where they could do some reflecting. They stapled it to their work and when I had my parent teacher interview I started with those work samples.” Lark also mentions using reflection and rubrics. She talks about students reflecting on their work assignments in an open-ended format and her use of rubrics. “...you know, I got my really good rubrics. They’re done. I don’t want to write one every time I start. But here’s like my writing one. I may change a couple things for persuasive writing and report writing. And its thorough, ... I like it to be useful for the kids, there’s the point. So I am actually teaching to those 10 steps of writing. It’s like, well, let’s highlight these three, like voice, [and] organization...”

Other forms of collaborative assessment used are conferencing and portfolios. Shayne engages in teacher-student conferencing regularly. “Now what I’m learning is that if I put myself at one of those centres then I can conference with a group everyday and get a lot of really meaningful conversation happening and documentation as well.” She also conferences with students who are struggling writers in order to know what it is they understand and says, “They reveal all kinds of stuff.” She continued to describe a second type of conferencing that is student-led. “What I’m working towards in this spring is something called a student led conference where the students will sit down with their parents and their portfolio and look through their work and share with their parents how much they’ve grown and how they know they’ve grown as a learner.”
During the student-led interview with parents the portfolio will be used. Shayne says, “I feel like for me that’s a very different approach to assessment because the focus is not on whether they are meeting the standards that the Ministry of Education is setting. But if they are able to articulate how they know that this is a good piece of writing, because this is what they now good writers do, means they’ve internalized it. ...They can feel proud of themselves and they can say look at what I can do.” Shayne’s aim is to improve the student portfolio. Harriet as well uses the portfolio as a part of assessment. “...all of their work is in a collection and I have a reflection sheet of all of our activities and projects. She feels that, the community is more interested in portfolio assessment [and] less about report cards but we still have to do them. Our administration is... interested in the personalized report card. So it’s a big huge piece to our school and our year.”

Long term planning has Shayne reflecting on skill development at a grade one level while keeping in mind the expectations of grade two levels. “But what I’m hoping for, that’s why I developed this sort of continuum of thinking, what does inquiry look like in kindergarten and grade one. It’s going to look like a lot of modeled inquiry, let’s do it, let’s explore a question together as a class. Because you need to have a fair amount of independence to be able to explore a question on your own I think. So next year, I’ll be teaching grade two so I am excited about seeing what I can build because they’ll just be a bit more independent.”

Theme four: Obstacles

For this segment I have placed obstacles the teachers face into three categories based on school, community, and teacher.

School based obstacles:

Shayne expressed a concern for lack of direction. She explains, “…the Board approved the vision but what wasn’t clearly articulated in the handbook was the
implementation of the vision and what this vision would look like in concrete terms. How would the teachers organize their school year, how would teachers organize their classroom day, what would the process of collaboration look like, how would decisions get made? How would we resolve conflicts? So there were a lot of unfinished pieces when I arrived. And in our first year we struggled”. The Board had given them the go-ahead, they had a handbook, but they did not have clear leadership. Shayne deliberated, “Some of the obstacles I think are, were, at the administrative level because I think administration also wasn’t sure what this vision would look like in the classroom. Administration was more of an obstacle at the beginning because they kind of left us alone. I feel like what we really needed was leadership and we didn’t have that leadership. So I’ve been kind a stepping up as a leader which is only awkward because I’m not a vice-principal. And some teachers don’t always love it when another teacher steps up and takes a leadership role.” Direction would now be ushered in from the bottom up and Shayne queried how that would come into effect and what might be the impact.

Lark explained, “I think there’s not great leadership in a day-to-day way that I miss. I like checking in. I like being told I’m good, you know. That gives me security. I want to know I’m doing the right thing because I want to make sure I get paid and I’ve got my job. Like, it’s, I need that feedback. So, when we’re off on a tangent I know I’ve got the union, there’s no worry that way. I’m used to this sort of working hard and it being acknowledged …”

In addition, she addresses the need for better organization. Lark describes a situation where she wanted to have a meeting and her fellow teachers did not support her request. But she felt strongly about the need to plan and eventually had to get the principal on board to call the meeting. Lark feels that her colleagues sometimes have their own way of doing things and she states, “That’s an obstacle for me because we don’t set priorities and things aren’t attended to in a real skillful organized way. We say we balance the intellect with the intuition, that’s one of our values. We gotta work on that.”
Shayne believed the vision could be better exercised, and addressed two factors to support this, time and partnership. She felt time for collaboration was key. “We have been fighting for that time and getting it reluctantly but it’s such important time. Because we just need time to plan and talk together, ‘cause I think we could figure it out as a staff. It’s hard when you’re caught up in the current of the day.” She also believed in building a partnership with the school they were placed with. Being a newcomer to a location where a school already existed made for an awkward situation. “We were also housed inside a larger school, so there were a lot of relationships that needed to be developed. The larger host school wasn’t very open to our being there. They were a bit suspicious.... They felt like, ‘what, our schools not good enough’ kind-of-attitude. So I really felt like I had to win them over and our administrator had never expected or hoped or wanted an alternative school in her building. So ... we were all learning together.”

‘Breaking ground’ Shayne felt was exhaustive. She and her colleagues had to engage in continuous problem solving throughout the year if they wanted to see improvement. Shayne describes, “So one of the things I find most exciting but also most challenging about our school is that we’re in process. So we’re figuring it out as we go along, which means we make mistakes but it also means that when we get something right it feels amazing. So our first year, we spent a lot of time thinking about process. For example, we didn’t have a parent council. So we had to, in writing bylaws, create those processes for how we were going to collaborate. Some of the questions I had were, how are all of our classrooms going to fit together to create a whole. Like, if we’re building a community school then there needs to be some common themes or threads that tie the classrooms together. And so - I was really pushing for themes, for structure, for framework, for process and we got there and were getting there but um. Our second year we grew we added two new teachers to the staff and that changed everything. I’m feeling like we’ve had a lot of success from last year that we can build on.”

Problem solving was slow going because to implement ideas resources needed to be in place. Shayne describes, “Some of the obstacles were a lack of resources. I still
don’t have a DRA kit. I don’t have leveled readers. Like I’m still struggling to get the basic resources that I need.” Raine explained that they were given a small budget, which was not nearly enough to set up an indoor and outdoor space that reflected a holistic quality. Lark states, “I think it’s an obstacle that we’re not being given the proper resources to really give birth to the school as it’s laid out in the proposal.”

Raine’s main concern was about the space she was working in. “We were designated the third floor for our programs and imagine a kindergarten class on the third floor with no educational assistant and the washrooms are across this huge space... So I had a lot of struggles and I just kept being told, you’re an alternative school this is the space you’re given. You don’t get an educational assistant.” For developmental reasons of five year olds, Raine expressed, “So that to me didn’t make any sense at all...” She continued, “So we had to do a lot of fighting last year and finally in January we were given a classroom and two kindergarten classes had to share one classroom. Luckily the weather was great so we were outside most of the time... We were also given the space outside the library with this cage. So we can store all our outside materials in there and in the morning we just set up our program.”

Disconnect between the home school and the alternative school was obvious in that they held their meetings separately and information wasn’t automatically shared. This block in communication placed Raine and her colleagues at a disadvantage. “A lot of the onus ... to bridge with the new school was put on us. That we “the haves” had to bridge with the new school.” The impression she got from them was, “Why do we (Alternative school) get this and they don’t.” Raine thought to herself, “Well ‘we’ worked for all this. It’s not like this was granted. I worked my whole summer for the materials I needed for my program.”

Lark also spoke to the dynamic between the home school and the alternative school. There is some concern felt for how the alternative school will appear if the EQAO results are weak. The fear of looking “less-than” by comparison encourages Lark to defend her philosophy. “Its like you (the home school) don’t care about our school ‘cause we probably aren’t going to get good results on EQAO and maybe we will. I
would like to. I’m not going to not do our regular program just to try to get good EQAO but I want what we’re doing to blossom into really great results with everything.” Lark then moves on to say, “I explain my ‘whacky’ stuff and tell them how it connects and I try to state it to these more mainstream sort of people. I try to bring legitimacy to what we’re doing because I feel that they think it’s a bunch of kids running around and its not…” Lark reflects, “I feel like trust is an obstacle, trust in what we’re doing.”

**Community based obstacles:**

Shayne felt sometimes community parents can be uncooperative. “…the parents were impatient if we made mistakes”. She expressed parents could pressure teachers until they felt “really miserable” and could present them with difficulties that persuaded them to leave. She queried, “So there’s kind of like, the struggle to figure out what’s the role of parents and how do you involve parents in a way that feels respectful? But how do you also give teachers enough space and trust [in knowing that] they have the professionalism to work through these things”.

Raine felt a big struggle when it came to implementing her philosophy in the presence of objecting parents. During our interview Raine was able to articulate her view to me quite clearly but when on the job and confronted by parents she felt uneasy. She also thought not having a good relationship with administration made situations more of a challenge. “My first year I had a bit of trouble with the parents, what they wanted ’cause I just heard rumors that there were people that weren’t satisfied … We were stating what our mandate was, we were connecting kids outside. So we were outside and I think they wanted a little more academic… I think last year I went really alternative because my teaching partner was really Waldorf based and she was like, no we’re not doing anything concrete with writing and representing and reading… We wait till grade one ’cause that’s what Waldorf does. … But I think our parents were a little disappointed… So I didn’t feel necessarily supported by all my parents. I felt some [support from] specific parents, not all of
them. I really struggled with my administration last year. I didn’t feel like they really got who we were.”

To define holistic education as a concept can be a challenge among a group of people. Lark explains, “So if we could say the obstacle is - there are many, many, many takes on what holistic education should be. ...it’s very hard to get agreement from the parents.”

The principal who, Lark would say, “feels good sometimes ... [is] so stressed out by the way this is all going.” Lark describes at length how parent’s uncooperative behaviour impacts the alternative school. “It’s bothersome to me but it also discredits us because there is dissatisfaction... The bad behaviour of the parents [falls on] our principal. Lets put it this way. The principal gets about 100 emails a day from our school, from our parents. That doesn’t make our school look good. That doesn’t make our principal want to get involved anymore. She has to work on the defensive rather than on the creative assertive leadership - from that stance.”

She continues, “It makes the school less of a beloved to the principal to lead well. She’s already got two [schools], that’s a huge problem right there... So I think that’s an obstacle, that we are not given ample leadership. There is a lot more to consider. Like, she could be guiding us to help develop this holistic curriculum, which is hitting enough of the ministry notes. And rather she’s just sort of ... checking it over rather than helping to develop it.”

**Teacher based obstacles:**

Shayne speaks to the need for fostering good collaboration. “Last year I felt like there was no one on staff that I could collaborate with because they weren’t ready to think about things in quite the same way as I was. Because I wanted to think sort of beyond my classroom and think about the school as a whole and they were so wrapped up in just managing their own classroom that they couldn’t handle the visionary thinking. So having one more teacher on staff has changed everything for
me this year.” Shayne continues, “I think we struggled because we didn’t trust each other. We didn’t know each other, expectations were very high and teachers were bewildered because they were left on their own to figure out what this vision would look like in the classroom.”

Shayne describes how teachers struggle with managing the curriculum creatively. “I think the barriers are, sort of actually, like a lack of imagination. I think teachers see the curriculum as a checklist or a shopping list and they have to check everything off. And what I think teachers need some more support around is to look at the curriculum and really pull out the big ideas and trust that if they can integrate, right, that if teachers had better skills in terms of integration, I think that the learning would be more meaningful for students.” Shayne relates that the pressures derived from assessment and tight timelines can keep teachers in line with using the traditional methods of teaching. “So I think teachers are resistant to cooperative learning and working in centres or giving kids opportunities to work in small groups because I think it is harder to manage and harder to assess.” She adds, “So I think it’s that teachers are afraid that they’re not going to cover everything and because they’re trying to cover everything they often do a very superficial job. They skim the surface and I think they really miss the opportunity to go deep. And I think deep is where you want to go and that’s where I think the real learning happens.”

Shayne explains inexperience contributes to being able to trust one’s ability. She says, “Inexperience lends teachers to being afraid of taking risks professionally.” Later on she follows with a more detailed explanation saying, “I think the biggest obstacle would probably be fear and kind of inexperience ...because when you are trying to do something new you don’t have anything to fall back on. You have no history, you have no - yah, there’s just no roots. So – It’s hard to know – It’s hard to trust that you know what you’re doing. It’s hard to trust you’re going in the right direction. I feel like the handbook is kind a like – I hold it out as a guide, a goal that I am working towards. I feel like as long as I am moving towards that goal I know that I will get there eventually but it’s going to take me a long time before I can figure out all the different pieces of the vision.”
Another challenge she addresses is, “So for me striking that balance between work and life has been a challenge for a long time because teaching is so demanding. I knew that going to the [alternative school] would mean that I would be working hard, I had never expected that I would be working this hard and I really found last year was the hardest teaching year I think I’ve ever had, but as I told you this year, I’m having the best teaching year I’ve ever had. I think part of that is because I trust myself. I trust that even though I’m not exactly where I want to be yet, as a teacher, I trust that I’m on the right path so I’m much more forgiving. I try to be forgiving of myself, as I stumble along the way not, like, not knowing everything.”

Harriet suggests, “...sometimes there is a breakdown with the teachers and I think it has a lot to do with pressure. So it’s even more important to align and to be very communicative and kind-a stay grounded and support each other.” Harriet relays that it is difficult to remain confident when a teacher has limited experience and is facing pressure from external sources. “Well the support breakdown sometimes within the teachers is because of the external pressures that are happening - that’s what I’m finding in our school. And that’s sometimes about experience and sometimes about confidence” She points out that trust is weakened by conflicts. “There are some conflicts with staff and there’s a bit of abrasion based on just energy levels – difficulties, where there’s maybe difficulties in their class and there’s breakdowns in communication or trust, where that trust is lost.”

Another issue Harriet raises, regards the amount of time and energy given to planning. “So there’s a lot of planning involved. Like I said, because I’m so excited about the passion of the staff, the other teachers there, I don’t mind the constant planning. Like, I find it invigorating but it’s a lot. It’s a lot of wear; it’s a lot of energy like, we don’t take breaks. It’s just constant.”

Being self-aware helps a teacher to identify one’s areas of strengths and needs and to define what one’s limits are. “I have more confidence then some of the other teachers that are a bit younger and have less life experience. Sometimes I push back and that’s like I have limits. In alternative schools ...I think there is, it is very
demanding because of the small staff, high needs, and emotional needs of some of the students and parents. It’s high expectations, brand new school, high expectations right.”

**Theme five: Supports**

Working with like-minded colleagues was considered very important. Shayne responds, “I would say that I get a lot of my support outside of the school from teacher friends that I met along the way who I really admire and respect. So I find that when you find a teacher-friend who teaches like you or inspires you or motivates you or challenges you, I find that I hold onto them and I try to connect with them outside of the classroom... I would say this year I have one teacher on staff who I’ve connected with in a very wonderful way and we have done some incredible collaboration.” She continues, “So having someone else on staff who wants to engage in these ideas with me and who’s creative and excited and inspired is... it really pushes you as a teacher. So I really think you need an ally and all you need is one.” Harriet feels working with colleagues who have experience and show dedication are very supportive. “I feel that, trust right now, there is a lot of trust built up and that I do feel supported.”

Professional development was acknowledged and Harriet makes reference to the training she underwent which had an aboriginal focus. “I did workshops with the aboriginal education centre and I found that was a really important connection to inform my own teaching, especially with environmental education. Because our school, one of the pillars is environmental education and the link to just aboriginal perspectives is, it’s so closely tied.” Raine participated in Waldorf training, “We brought in a woman to do Waldorf art with us and the school paid for a little bit of that.” And she includes, “We (the staff) did the Pine Project altogether last summer.” Lark gleaned support from a three-year holistic therapy program, which helped her to be aware of and tune into how kids are thinking.
Parent’s help was also considered beneficial. Shayne says, “Parents have also been very active in bringing in guest speakers and creating workshops and I attend those workshops. So last week we went to a workshop that was about antiracism.” Another parent brought in a book called, “The Anti-Bias Curriculum” that described a framework they could teach by. It addressed self-reflection, social justice, and positive action. Parents also brought in a guest speaker who discussed peace building and peer mediators. Raine discussed at length the support she received from parents. Parents planned for a visitor to come in and perform African drumming, singing, and dancing for the students. For interested teachers, parents also arranged for a Qi Gong instructor to come in and lead sessions. Raine continues to add, “We have a parent doing a little bit of focusing with us which is bringing people in touch with emotion in their body and nurturing that and releasing it. ...We have a woman that comes into our school and volunteers her time to do story telling two to three times a week. She’s a parent and we’ve set up a little room for her with all these resources and she comes and she works with kids to tell stories. She comes to my room once a week. I feel so blessed to have somebody. She works with the Native community. There are so many amazing parents that come and work with us. I couldn’t do it without them.”

Connection with community was described to be valuable. Lark feels immense support by parents whose children she has taught for two years. “These people know public school for the most part. So what they gave me, I boiled it down to three elements: faith, gratitude, and holding, just holding the space. Keeping it warm. They’re there. I’m like guys come on in. They’re like...right there! They’re not invasive. The faith was so awesome. That allowed me freedom and creativity to do my thing. That’s what I look for ... their physical presence. They show up. We went on 30 trips the first year.” Shayne says, “So I think parents are encouraging me and feeding me with just enough to keep going.” She continues, “I feel like I have the support of the community to do this work and I feel like that gives me courage and it also makes me, I don’t know, feel like it’s worth it, you know, like especially when people are appreciative of what you’re doing. I don’t know I just feel really lucky.
‘Cause I feel like I love it so much I work so hard but I’m getting so much out of it.” Harriet felt support from parents but also acknowledges her community. “And just my own community, my own experience being queer, kind of outside was huge for me - for teaching in alternative schools because I could be out. I could be comfortable being out…”

Teachers also identified recognition and rewarding experiences. Shayne explains, “… we were talking about how teachers don’t often get recognized for the work that they do and a lot of teachers sacrifice a lot… and rarely does someone ever say thank you or recognize them. And I feel like I’ve sort of learned to take those hugs from a six year old as real recognition that I am doing a good job. Those kids are happy to be at school. They feel good about themselves. They are taking risks and learning all kinds of exciting things, you now, taking what I’m offering them. And I feel like that’s very rewarding… And I also find the work we did – it was an art project that my 4, 5, 6 class participated in. It lends itself to kind of opening up the world of activism and equity and just thinking about history and mistakes and what is fair and learning from that. That’s one thing that really was made a huge impact.”

Harriet mentions, “I think I feel support from our administration because we’ve earned it…” Lark describes, “I do feel like we are being reasonably supported by the admin. to bring initiatives through.” And later suggests, “They offer the critical pathways coaches coming in. [The coaches] will sit and talk to us and make it work for us. They are not trying to yank us away from what we’re doing. [Admin] have hired a Waldorf art teacher to whip us through the basics of watercolour. It wasn’t nearly enough but it was a start.” The administration is not fully aware of their philosophy but Lark feels, “They are honouring us as being the experts.”

Shayne also made reference to the school handbook. “I feel like the handbook is… I hold it out as a guide, a goal that I am work towards. I feel like as long as I am moving towards that goal I know that I will get there eventually but it’s going to take me a long time before I can figure out all the different pieces of the vision.”
Lastly Shayne considers this: “So I’m always generating [ideas] and I think the thing that keeps me happy is that I love it so much. Like I love teaching and I love creating curriculum and thinking my way through big ideas and I love working with kids. So I feel like when I go to school they can sense how much I love being there. They feel great, I feel great. There’s a lot of love in my classroom.” She later follows with, “I’ve also implemented things that are working and trying new ideas and I get to say let’s try this and I get to see it grow in front of my own eyes and that’s incredibly exciting. And even if it doesn’t work I still find it exciting because I’m always thinking about how to fix it and make it better.”
CHAPTER 6

Holistic Perspective:

In examination of the participants’ narratives, I thought about the presence of soul. They used words such as: creative expression, nurturing emotion, and tuning or tapping into students’ energy or psyche. These words for me depicted an essence of spirituality because they are not the typical words used to describe teaching strategies or academic expectations. Their responses were about incorporating their sensory capabilities to extend personal understanding. So I pondered, how was soul manifested through their holistic perspective? My synthesis looks at a teacher’s holistic perspective in relation to the soul and spirituality, rather than in relation to religion. Education consultant Michael Dallaire discusses Canadian spirituality in secular schools. He defines spirituality as a lifestyle.

Soul is present in the natural world, in the creative life of the human community, and in the heart of each individual who lives and breathes and shares his/her being with others. Spirituality, then, is about paying attention to the presence of the soul... Spirituality is also concerned with becoming aware of the absence of the soul... It is about living in congruence with the insights and demands of the soul that operates both in the world and in our deepest selves (2011, p. 26).

Recovering our spirituality in education is to include the way we live in our teaching. It is for us to be in attentiveness, presence, awareness, and compassion. Miller feels we need to reclaim our souls and bring soul into education. He says, “I believe that the time has come for soulful learning. We have had enough of machinelike approaches to education that deaden the human spirit” (2000, p. 11). He says it is time to listen to the learnings of the soul that nurture connection. Miller informs us that this is not a new vision, as the ancient Greeks and indigenous peoples upheld it, and it is found in Taoism and in the teachings of Christ and Buddha (2000, p. 12).

What does living/teaching soulfully mean for educators who are implementing a holistic philosophy? I consider teaching with soul as being open to multiple types
of positive connections. Soulfulness, to me, comes from intently nurturing a focus that grows and resonates beyond our human physical sensitivity. I see it as the making, the broadening, or the preserving of bridges that together link the self to the whole of the universe. It means guiding students to enhance their self-awareness, to draw out their empathetic ability to connect with others, and to foster appreciation for our interdependence with nature in an effort to show how everything is interrelated. Importantly, it puts into practice how our human self works with our soul.

In analyzing the participants’ accounts, it is not my aim to identify these teachers as spiritual or to define their practice as spiritual in relation to a religious belief system. I want to share their ideas of what holistic perspective for teaching means to them. Shayne introduces to us the idea of working with the whole child and suggests there are multiple points of entry to reach a child. She also points out the multiple intelligences children use to learn. Shayne draws attention to the fact that we have a responsibility to honour our human capabilities. In a public school system, where education is a right, we need to respect the differences that define students. With equity as the backbone to her pedagogical instruction, Shayne reflects on how to best meet the needs of her students and how to help them internalize a healthy respect for their own capabilities. Harriet discusses the value of students going deep in their learning. Engagement is critical for knowledge building and she addresses the relevance of this for personal connection. Relating material to individual experience helps sustain interest and drives curiosity towards making inferences and being reflective. She uses active learning through the arts and through movement. Self-expression ignites agency and allows students to portray and make sense of their own understanding. Raine’s explanation leads to the idea of embodied learning. She is attentive to the need for students to experience learning (i.e.: dramatic enactments) and by being so, emphasizes the notion that the curriculum does not live and breath until students interact with it. Her work is responsive to the energy of the students, and therefore nurturing their emotional wellbeing is significant to her. Tapping into their energy and tuning into
their emotions helps her to read their spirits so she can work with them as co-creators through activities and assignments. Lark continues with the importance of cultivating a blended approach to teaching, one that is both structured and open. She points out the importance for being aware of the mundane and the spiritual aspects and that we need to find a balance between the two. Lark reminds us that the environment is fertile and filled with possibility. But in the process of self-growth we must all play our part. She expresses that in the act of creating, the love resonates, and when this happens we must remember to harmonize with care.

The way of teaching for each participant differs in focus, making their perspective unique to them. Yet they all describe moving beyond the curriculum into personal experience. They show learning as an interactive process among personal, political, ecological, cultural, and spiritual connections. They use strategies that reflect our human capabilities and they recognize learning in students’ ability to choose, create, and move. Dallaire writes,

_A spiritual education that promotes living in harmony with and in service to the world is rooted in an alternative, yet complimentary, way of knowing. It is an approach to knowing that is often marginalized and muted within Canadian education. Should we be able to explore the gifts and limits of each way of knowing and embrace a more cooperative association of both ways, we can hope that our education will be comprehensive and hence more responsive to the needs of our time (2011, p. 34)._ 

**Lesson Planning and Delivery:**

When I asked about the planning and delivering of lessons all participants referred to the different learning styles of students. Through observation and interaction they would determine which methods worked to engage with students’ learning styles. John Miller’s work regarding whole child education outlines three positions for teaching: transmission, transaction, and transformation. We teach in every position, but he focuses on the transformation position because distinct to it
“is the recognition of the inner life of the student and how it can be nourished” (2010, p. 11). Teaching from the transaction position gave teachers the opportunity to find which specific skills needed addressing for each student. They could identify the skills being used by engaging with students as they problem solved and presented. But interactive methods that applied enquiry and reflection also revealed more of the student’s experience, and with this understanding, teachers could consider why students used the skills they did. Teaching from the transformation position better informed their choice and application of methods and strategies.

The participants referred to multiple intelligences. Howard Gardner describes more than seven intelligences in his book, “Intelligence Reframed.” He warns against uniform schooling because of the assumptions it relies upon. He says, “…we obviously look different from one another and have different personalities and temperaments. Most important, we also have different kinds of minds… since we each assemble our intelligences in unique configurations.” He continues: “As educators, we face a stark choice: ignore these differences or acknowledge them” (1999, p. 150). The teachers all spoke about monitoring students’ level of engagement. Teachers provided opportunities that considered their learning styles and levels of ability. Students could explore and problem solve by being tactile, artistic, dramatically expressive, physically active, interactive, independent, verbal, visual, imaginative, methodical, contemplative and reflective.

Movement was recognized as an integral component to learning. Participants referred to movement that happens during unstructured and structured play, games, art, storytelling, drama, and dance. It is key to note that in the doing of these activities a combination of intelligences are activated. Strategies that move students through visualizing something, to thinking it, expressing it, feeling and doing it, encourage processing that incorporates multiple human capacities. Interaction that occurs within a drama enactment, playing, or painting, for example will unify the body kinesthetically, with the mind intellectually, and the heart emotionally. Professor of Education, Betty Jane Wagner says: “Drama works powerfully because the bodies of the participants are stimulated as well as the minds. We can only learn
when we integrate new experience into our ongoing process of receiving and integrating all information." She further reflects on Renk who says: "We learn by responding to stimuli and by actively constructing our own reality. Teachers are not dispensers of information but facilitators of such very complex and individual processes ... If information is always received as a constituent of a whole situation, then teaching means establishing suitable situations. Which is precisely what educational drama has done" (1998, p.17). Movement allows the body to physically explore problem solving in tandem with the mind. In their examples, teachers expressed that including interactive components helped make learning more accessible to students. It maintained interest levels, engagement, and extended their ability to think critically.

Artistic activities were also mentioned. In the realm of creativity, participants referred to the Reggio Emilia approach. This approach, founded by Loris Malaguzzi, is practiced at a well-known school in Italy, The Atelier. Below is an excerpt explaining the philosophy on which the Atelier evolved. Malaguzzi speaks about creativity,

"We have to convince ourselves that it is essential to preserve in children ... the feeling of wonder and surprise, because creativity, like knowledge, is a daughter of surprise. We have to convince ourselves that expressivity is an art, a combined construction... that expressivity has motivations, forms, and procedures; contents... and the ability to communicate the predictable and the unpredictable. Expressivity finds sources from play, as well as from practice, from study and from visual learning, as well as from subjective interpretations that come from emotions, from intuition, from chance, and from rational imagination and transgressions (2005, p. 8).

Art, whether drawing, painting, taking photos, sewing, sculpting, or creative writing, was described by the participants as a means to inspire self-expression. The uniqueness and originality of our ideas is tailored by our imagination, spontaneity, and intuition. Learning was considered a deepened experience when students could see themselves in it. The phrase “convincing ourselves” (from the quote above) constitutes the ability for us as teachers to reframe our idea of what learning is and
the role creativity has in it. Learning is the ability to turn our findings into an unknown, which cannot be done outside of creative measures.

Teachers also focused on students’ emotional wellbeing. They reflected on how students emotionally communicated while interacting. Shayne described moments when students arrived in class upset, Harriet discussed conflict developing in the middle of an activity, and Raine mentioned the anxiety felt by students when having to formally represent their learning. Author Daniel Goleman aims to broaden the traditional view of intelligence to include emotional intelligence. He describes emotional intelligence by referring to such human abilities as: self-awareness, self-control and management, self-motivation, and empathy (1995, p. 43). Goleman believes the emotional mind and rational mind are semi-independent faculties, interconnected. He puts forth that when in balance, they inform and refine one another supportively but when out of balance, emotions can hijack the intellect or the intellect can veto emotions (1995, p.9). Pedagogical strategies that encompass introspection and resolution equip students with emotional skills that could help them sensitively read their selves, others, and their environment.

The teachers spoke of social justice and environmentalism as pillars of teaching. They reflected on lessons and activities that examined the social, cultural, and political implications of diversity through topics based on identities such as gender, race, and immigrant status, for example. They also explored political issues regarding ecology and conservation. Thinking through these issues in a critical manner is being done with hope to initiate new ways of seeing. Edmund O’Sullivan writes extensively about transformative learning. In an essay regarding approaches to transformative learning he states, “We are most interested in the generation of energy for radical vision, action, and new ways of being. If humans are going to survive on this planet, we need new connections to each other and to the natural world. Changing political and economical relationships is part of the larger project of reconstituting and revitalizing all our relationships” (Miller, 2005, pp. 76 & 77). Inquiry-based learning supports students in making inferences that reveal our
interdependence and interconnectedness. Teachers found that building understanding through the making of connections shifted student's outlook to being fairer. O'Sullivan explains, “Although the complexities of a peace perspective is a world unto itself, my specific view of a transformative peace education is that it is an education that deals creatively with the complexities of conflict and violence” (1999, p. 168). In examining social, political, economical, and environmental conflicts teachers are equipping students with the awareness and ability to seek ways of interaction that are equitable and peaceful.

They also drew upon circles of community, the student community, the professional community, the parent community, and their personal community. Members of these groups aspired to collaborate and negotiate for more inventive and insightful ways to teach concepts. Parents, friends, and community members offered their knowledge, services and resources. They provided teachers with relevant books, volunteered on trips, ran workshops for teachers and students, and organized events. Teachers felt that working with community members enriched students’ learning as it moved away from the isolation of classroom-based learning. They found it valuable for students to connect what was happening in the classroom to what is happening in communities outside the classroom. This helped build a sense of belonging and togetherness.

Planning and delivering enriched lessons does not imply that teachers are at all times holistic in their teaching. Lessons are not always perfectly effective and teacher’s rapport with students is not always perfectly mindful. We are in constant flux in the making of decisions. At the site of decision-making is where holistic thinking as a phenomenon becomes transparent. In making a choice we are reminded of ‘being’ or ‘not being’ holistic. The interaction of differing perspectives creates a degree of conflict that makes us aware of disconnect. But contemplation and reflection can lead us to reconnect. Teaching with the aim of being holistic demonstrates an intrinsic human desire to positively creating a space where needless suffering and careless destruction is reduced.
Assessment:

When teaching from a holistic perspective, the purpose and meaning of assessment is often debated. Criticism of the view that assessment is a culminating result notes its rigid and limiting structure. But to view it as animate and ongoing notes its openness for possibility. Part of being human is our capability to evaluate. Holistic thought does not dismiss our ability to judge but it does question how and why we judge. The teachers interviewed have broadened their approach of assessment to incorporate methods that veer from the typical mechanistic and inauthentic influence of standardized testing.

Goal-oriented teaching has its detriments. Prescribed expectations, predetermined benchmarks, planned lessons, rubric based assignments and standardized testing all packaged together can gravely dull the brilliance of process. The consequence of this is that no matter the level of students’ success, inner agency becomes stifled because curiosity for learning is externally imposed. While the public school system’s focus is said to be on strengthening learning skills (i.e.: initiative, organization, collaboration and such...), instead, it is focused on managing learning using competition and fear of failure. Marking product that is derived primarily from external motivation is teaching students to learn outside of their hearts where thinking independent of emotion lacks agency and spirit.

So how then can assessment be positive? Evaluation is part of learning. Therefore, the understanding of learning as praxis directs us to see that evaluation involves reflective thinking. Unique to the act of reflecting is the summoning of curiosity from within. Learning holistically is the blending of external incentive with internal interest. The point of significance is, no matter what level of ability a student is working at, curiosity that is inherently inspired will seek to transcend it. Therefore, if assessment is inherent in the learning process, it is also a part of transcendence. Differing forms of assessment, practiced with multiple learning styles, diverse and valued sets of skills, and varied levels of abilities, will aim to have students themselves seek to surpass their limits. Assessment is positive when its
relevance informs further enquiry. Evaluation is like a permeable membrane and when crossed, we experience a zenith of enlightenment, a greater vision from where we once were.

Looking back to the interviews, the participants shared a common view of assessment. Beginning with their criticism, they were dubious about the purpose of standardized assessment and negative about the merits of EQAO. They posed two concerns: firstly, its reliability to better inform teaching practices for the enhancement of learning when it is so limited in technique and secondly, the negative impacts on schools and communities when an ill-informed public responds to these posted results. The participants also felt the focus on pencil paper tasks, as the main form of assessment was narrow in selection and structure, and therefore not truly reflective of students’ capabilities. Rubrics designed to level students effort on a scale from 1 to 4 was also called into question. The concern raised was in regards to students whose efforts achieved a low rating, a category representing academic weakness. The fear was that the mark would cause disappointment, nullify the student’s learning experience and discourage further trying. They raised the problem of unhealthy competition motivated by marks. This created the participants from one school to question if the report cards should even go home without a parental request. The strategy was a response to keep attention on whole child learning and move away from results as a predictive determinate. Lastly, one participant queried the need to force students to prove their learning. The implication raised was, is there benefit in students having personal input to how they demonstrate their learning? However, amongst this display of query, evaluation was not thrown out the window; instead teachers did feel that there was a relevant need for assessing that was positive.

Assessments viewed as constructive centered on applying techniques that were collaborative, reflective, and informative. For example, collaborative assessment techniques were creating rubrics and success criteria with students (assessment for learning). Other strategies include open dialogue, which gave teachers the opportunity to reflect on students’ contributions and make necessary
adjustments; group and individual student conferences; student-led conferencing for parent/teacher interviews; and student-created portfolios demonstrates the reflective quality of assessing. Portfolios contained collected pieces of work and students reflected critically on their abilities. Student’s input was sought for the report card regarding learning skills and work habits. Reflecting in this way helped them to identify their strengths and create new goals. Using the comments suggested by students made this tactic more personable and meaningful. Time was also provided for students as a class to reflect on their social/behaviour skills. This group activity identified by Shayne as “Peace Circle” could be impromptu or planned. Lastly, assessments such as the ones mentioned are also known as formative methods. The outcome informs the creation of strategies for continued development. An assessment process that engages a student in self-analysis is informative. A student can reach a new level of affirmed personal understanding: an awareness that equips one with the curiosity to question and with the motivation to apply his or her knowing. W. James Popham, a professor of education and information studies strongly believes that formative assessment is most critical to advancing learning. He says,

Rather, instructing students should be a carefully conceived enterprise in which decisions about what to do next are predicated on the best available information. Formative assessment supplies the evidence a teacher needs in order to make any necessary instructional adjustments. Formative supplies the evidence students need in order to make any necessary adjustments in how they are trying to learn something. Formative assessment, then, can help both teachers teach better and learners learn better. (2008, p.14)

Assessment that is interactive, formative, and reflective involves the sharing of agency. It is an act made with supportive intent, rather then competitiveness.

Lark questioned when our teaching is so scripted, who is actually teaching? Test directed teaching assumes we can’t or don’t learn best outside of external influence. This implication discredits our human ability and undervalues our human status as students and teachers. Ultimately, education through prescribed teaching and standardized testing has misrepresented and misused the human capacity to
value. Sadly, wielding value to instigate learning by shame is the crime of public education. Whereas, teachers teaching with reverence honour our interactive, introspective, and interdependent disposition. Holistic pedagogy brings together awareness and value within a more positive dynamic of shared power.

Moving away from a practice that is less competitive and shaming does not suggest learning becomes utopian, while it requires us to work with difference, meet conflict, and negotiate change. Rather, it suggests learning becomes more human. Analyzing the meaning and purpose of assessment, at the public school level, directs our attention to the fact that we need to value the measuring of learning differently.

In other words, holistic thinking encourages the reframing for how we value the position of not knowing. In the learning cycle of knowing and unknowing, unknowing is the pause right before curiosity sparks our will to seek. It is the place where questions rest and knowing stills, before it ripens. Stillness represents our familiarity with resources and with patterns. It is a gentle preserving of what we know. The unknown is space and time where we contemplate before reapplying our knowing in search of deeper meaning. When unknowing ripens, the capability to choose is experienced. The position of unknowing reveals our vulnerability as there is risk and potential for learning in the act of asking a question. In an essay, Joan Halifax discusses learning as initiation and its connection to not knowing. “Rites of passage are opportunities for individuals to leave behind that which is familiar, the known and knowing, and enter, by way of a committed plunge, into the unknown and experience firsthand of not-knowing. They are opportunities to bear witness to joy and suffering in oneself and others, and to heal” (Glazer, 1999, p. 176).

Holistic thought encourages the reframing of how we value the position of knowing. Knowing is the enactment of redefining, reshaping, recreating. It is the findings of a search but not an end. A door closed waiting to be opened. It is a fulfillment that yearns to quest further. Knowing is the readiness to let go of a solidified perception, to humbly release it into unknowing. Each position opens into
the other and each is relevant. In one there is vulnerability and in the other there is humility.

The participants’ experiences showed that using a compilation of methods is most demonstrative of students’ abilities. Plus, assessment is most valuable when it turns student awareness inwards. This was accomplished by involving students in the creation of it and by students reflecting on their results. Personal realizations gleaned from the product were informative and applicable but also, inspirational.

**Obstacles:**

The schools of the participants have a mandate that clearly states their commitment to holistic teaching. It is a vision that is shared amongst the whole school community, which promotes a collective understanding. Generally speaking, contributions made by members are in alignment since their values and beliefs concur. However, similarities aside, differences of opinion arise, which can lead to conflict. During the interview, I asked the participants about the obstacles they encountered while teaching.

As I said earlier, a new alternative school fitting within an already existing traditional school posed problems, the crux of which rested in the clash between their visions. The participants felt an obligation to explain their teaching to the colleagues located in the original school in order to prove that their efforts were legitimate. Some participants spoke defensively of their schools mission and felt the onus had been placed on them to bridge a connection between the two sets of staff. This perception left teachers feeling: upset, angry, frustrated, and insecure. These schools ran under different philosophies and housing them under one roof was probably necessary but created some negative consequences. The participants felt uneasy about the principal of the original school automatically becoming the principal of the new alternative school. They felt it necessary to have an administrator who understood and could address their needs in accordance to their
vision. Without compatible administrative guidance and leadership, they were building relations with a new school community that already had a history; while, at the same time, they were creating the structure and process of their own school. They experienced frustration and excitement with the breadth of this learning, as they had to organize and prioritize between their individual goals and the goals of the staff. Teacher performance was hindered at the alternative school as communication between the two sets of staff lacked coherence. Meetings between the schools were held separately and the alternative school was not consistently informed of the results. This meant they were making decisions with partial knowledge and faced problems that they felt could have been avoided. The participants felt a lack of adequate direction and recognition from the existing administration. Although, they did recognize that in combining these two schools the administration’s responsibilities became copious and much more complex. The participants, as excited as they were by the Board’s granting of approval to run their school, were disheartened by the realization that 1) there was no guidance for how a new school was to lay the groundwork and follow through with a mandate, and 2) there was little to no offering of professional development relevant to their organizing. To say the least, finding stability required ample amounts of collaboration and determination.

Another setback they faced was opening a new school with an insufficient budget. The allotted money was not enough to properly fund resources for the purpose of professional development, academic materials and furnishings. Inadequate resources greatly increased the need for their collective to problem solve in creative and fruitful ways. This was not easy in an unfamiliar environment. Not surprisingly, the teachers spoke of how it depleted their energy and their patience. It strained their personal confidence; trust in one another, and trust in their own work. Collectively and personally they frequently felt defensive. During meetings and the day-to-day running of the school there were internal frictions that made goal achievement a challenge. The impediments were identified as: disorganization, unsupportive interaction, fatigue from constant planning and re-
planning, and a work life imbalance. Lastly, unrelenting pressure amounted from parents who teachers thought were intolerant and impatient. Teachers struggled to find outer support and inner assurance as their professional experience was questioned. Faced with continual processing and reprocessing, problem solving tested their courage, perseverance, trust and ability to accept.

Maintaining integrity of vision while managing divergence of ideas is critical to the success of their teaching. It is difficult to do when one is feeling isolated, self-doubt, or blamed. Obstacles place teachers in stressful situations because when stopped in the flow of completing tasks, enthusiasm and determination often deplete. The constant demand to reframe thoughts and feelings and to readjust actions shows that we are always walking with one foot in certainty and the other in uncertainty. Consequently, while we are creating and applying ideas we are also readying ourselves to defend and justify them. Understanding the purpose for implementing our ideas is crucial. We also need to articulate our purpose. However we also need to be willing to listen, negotiate, and compromise with others when finding solutions.

Moving through obstacles requires a great deal of time and energy. This demands responsibility, confidence, and tenacity. In teachers’ experience, their ability to work as a collective was critical to achieving a constructive outcome. This meant that teachers would need to have trust in their teaching ability, feel a sense of belonging and have fortitude.

To manage obstacles we reach out to community; we also reach within ourselves. We go back, turn within, and rethink. So, on one hand we engage in critical thinking and on the other hand we mindfully contemplate. As soon as we think we have the right answer an obstacle pops up and challenges us to ask, ‘is this answer right enough?’ reminding us of the fact that our answer are not always the perfect answer. Therefore, our responsibility is not just to be prepared and to know; it is to not know and to be open to becoming aware. Our egos must consider possibility, otherness, and humility.
Implementing pedagogy with a holistic focus asks teachers to distinguish between *knowing* and *awareness*. To know is having an answer, proof of learning, static knowledge. It is the ownership of understanding. Awareness is being *in* learning. In the present, we are experiencing understanding, acceptance of what we don’t know, and openness to receiving. The teachers in this study aimed to not get stuck in their expertise gained by their experience. They were also willing to rework their ideas and make suitable changes. This fluidity shows openness to seeing beyond the self and into the other.

Teachings of Zen Buddhism explain that we are always in change. While changing we respectfully receive another perspective and responsibly let go of our own ego. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, an author and lecturer on Zen Buddhism says, “Knowing always requires a mediator but seeing is direct...” Real seeing from a Zen point of view is, “When you see a flower,... not only must you see it but the flower must see you also; otherwise there is no real seeing.” When this mutual seeing takes place he continues, “...the flower ceases to be a flower. I cease to be myself. Instead there is unification. The flower vanishes into something higher than a flower and I vanish into that something higher than any individual object. Now when this leveling up takes place, this being absorbed into something higher than each relative being...there is intuition, awakening...” (1980, pp. 23-25). Obstacles can redirect our attention from the self and focus it towards what is actually in front of us. When we truly see what is in front of us then there can be opportunity for change.

This difference between knowing and awareness makes notable the disparity between traditional education and holistic education. Traditional education is a linear approach to the acquisition of learning. Holistic education is based on a cyclical process of transformation that nurtures learning as a form of awareness. It is a more fluid position, moving between the duality of knowing and not knowing. Existing in knowing with a curious mind motivates unknowing and existing in unknowing leads to knowing. Conflict that prompts reflection is the root of this process. Conflict provides the opportunity for choice and to choose mindfully is to be wholly alive. Obstacles push us to be mindful of the present, of our senses, of
difference, and of balance, while being mindful in reflection and mindful in connection. Obstacles can feel demanding of action or merely suggestive; either way they command caution, tuning in and critical thinking.

Supports:

The participants were able to sustain their perseverance, commitment and faith due to the supports they relied upon. They acknowledged the people who worked alongside them with admiration and gratitude.

The teachers explained that working with people who were “like-minded” made it easier to overcome conflicts. Collaboration with colleagues, collegial friends and parents was described as inspiring. A common language united the staff and was passed onto the students and parents. Teachers recognized administration for their relevant guidance and the Teachers’ Union for its help in supporting professional development expenditures. However, the main source of support was the trust developed among colleagues. Cultivating this form of trust mirrored developing trust in one’s self and in one’s teaching ability.

Teachers spoke about their gratitude for the parent community. Support from parents included volunteering their time or expertise and bringing in resources or guest speakers. These endeavors built connections and expanded the school community into the local community. Assistance from parents gave teachers courage because it affirmed their classroom efforts. Another aspect of support concerned the sense of belonging. A participant commented on the value of feeling connected within a community both inside and outside of work. Communities influence one another politically, culturally and socially, and for this reason it was seen as important to establish clear and cohesive connections. Teachers recognized the value in creating a school climate of belonging, where students felt safe sharing and taking risks. This is interesting since teachers did not always feel safe and like they could take risks in their new blended work environment.
Making links between the personal and the professional, and between the past and the present, contributed to enriching their work life. All teachers drew from their experience in and outside of work and could describe how this informed their current practice. Learning from past experiences provided them with the insight necessary to improving their intellectual and emotional skill base. Making links within life experiences seemed to provide teachers with inner strength and the confidence needed to help tread new ground.

Participants referred to student feedback as a source of support and they were energized by students’ level of engagement and emotional expression. All teachers spoke of how ‘tuning in’ with their students helped create an intuitive knowing that guided their flexibility in decision making. Teachers worked with both their knowledge and instinct in order to make learning meaningful.

As well, they were excited by the mere opportunity to be working in a school where holistic philosophy is identified as a focus. Potential and possibility fed their aspiration, securing their interests and desires, which made them keen to accept the level of responsibility needed to follow through with their philosophy.

Supportive interactions nourish courage, confidence, trust, respect, and faith, all of which are qualities that help teachers mindfully reflect on differences, rethink ideas, re-examine power dynamics, respond for change and re-energize. But this nourishment does even more. It bestows love. It breathe life into re-creation, which as Buddhist philosophy conveys, is done with love. All participants at some point in the interview spoke of their love for teaching. The collection of quotes includes: “Like I love teaching and I love creating curriculum and thinking my way through big ideas and I love working with kids. They feel great. I feel great. There is a lot of love in my classroom.” or “It was because we loved collaborating with each other… It’s really empowering and addictive to collaborate, to share ideas and build on those ideas.” or “I love the alternative. I love that and I could go all the way [with that]…” or “I think its important, once the boundaries of what is acceptable to teach are completely blown open ... to find balance and have boundaries ... because when the
Love starts flowing it can get wild and then there is just too much material that is uncontained ... like holistically uncontained." Love rides the connections we make like the waves of the ocean. At the moment of a meaningful connection a vibration of joy shoots from the body out into the atmosphere. It is a knowing so grand, like an ultimate connection beyond the human form; an explosion and we seek it. When teachers feel it they know it!

Synonymous to teaching is learning and learning is re-creation or love in action. The qualities outlined above are also how bell hooks describes love. hooks describes true love as a combination of care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication (2000, p. 5). Teachers who embrace their emotional being, and in their uniqueness regenerate healthy ways of being, are truly devoted to teaching. Transformational learning is the transgression of limits, the turning point between unlearning and relearning and we need heart to be able to unlearn. bell hooks reflects on the words of Erich Fromm who defines love, as “the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth.” He continues, “Love is as love does. Love is an act of will ... We do not have to love. We choose to love” (2000, pg. 4 & 5).

Anxiety and frustration slow the progression of loving. We fear failing at something we think we ought to be able to do. In fear we lose sight of love, as hooks points out, and ultimately lose sight of our pedagogical vision. The fear of loss puts us in loss, as we are separated from our reflective and empathetic qualities, which help us to make accurate decisions. However, seeing our way through loss with love helps us to see with insight and helps us to forgive our selves and others.

Anxiety and frustration are feelings we manage but so are joy and harmony. Fear keeps us mindful in our loving, and love keeps us mindful in our fearing. bell hooks states, “Cultures of domination rely on the cultivation of fear as a way to ensure obedience” (2000, p. 93). Teachers who are considered unconventional because they deviate from the status quo are finding healthy ways to work with their fear. They are trying to reset a new centre of balance where thoughtfulness,
care, and empathy are at the root of their decisions. bell hooks suggests that a domination model in schools teaches that fear, deceit, abuse, addiction, greed, and shame are accepted norms. From this standpoint, arguably, humanity’s wellbeing is being quashed out of young people at an early age. Teachers who are fighting for the right to teach for and with awareness need support to counteract this oppressive system. They are restoring our ability to connect emotionally and intuitively so that we can see in new and transformative ways.
Conclusion:

This study inquired into how experienced teachers are attempting to implement a holistic pedagogy within a public academic institution that mandates using a holistic approach to teaching. The two alternative public schools of focus identified a vision that brings together community, collaboration, democracy, social justice, ecological sustainability and the arts. The teachers interviewed expressed the need for a common vision shared amongst the community so cohesion could be fostered in a context where there is a multiplicity of perspectives to consider. They found collaboration, as well as trust and confidence in one’s own abilities and others, to be key components in supporting their efforts to implement their philosophy.

The teachers spoke with awareness about the oppressive limits of political, economical, cultural, and social inequities that they had drawn from experience. They were willing to question and reflect on their own assumptions and beliefs in the hopes of creating pedagogy that values interdependence, strengthens interconnectedness and creates a compassionate approach for guiding meaningful learning. They all spoke of having an inner drive to do something more than teach by the standardized curriculum. They wanted to teach in a way that embraced difference and reached the whole child in their uniqueness and overall wellbeing.

When the participants shared their stories they spoke as co-creators. They recognized the two-way flow between teaching and learning and saw themselves as part of a much broader teaching community. The culture of the classroom was enriched through the use of inclusive and empathetic practices. They valued the contribution of community members and the opportunity to explore their natural surroundings.

I found teacher’s motivation grew the more they exercised strategies that brought about creative and critical learning from combining traditional and holistic teaching practices. Overcoming pedagogical tensions between obstacles and
supports prompted them to rework their ideas and persevere with the collaborative process. Finding solutions was a rewarding experience, and these successes strengthened their faith and trust.

What I learned in reflection of my experience and that of the participants is there is no one great teaching method. A group of students who constitute one class exhibit diversity among their identities, abilities, and perspectives that are full of rich and complex understandings. A holistic perspective is not a method. It is a way of seeing, feeling and intuiting that works in connection with method and structure. But it is also not a perfect way of seeing. It is a way, however, for us to see reflectively. Reflection is a technique for us to artfully, responsibly, and compassionately engage in change that is enlightening. A reflective teacher is one who teaches for the purpose of deepening awareness. This requires our ability to be self-accepting and forgiving. Acceptance of the human form is needed for us to actualize a vision that is empathetic. Empathetic teachers are compassionate in their approach and can guide learning in transformative ways because they are serving interdependence.

A model based on interconnectedness respects how we in our human form learn, and values how choices are made. Teaching from a transformation position embodies the understanding that teaching and learning are blended, making communication between them a two-way process. This position is also open and mindful to the diverse learning styles that address physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual forms of knowing. Excellence is not determined by the intellect alone. Standardized education for the mere promotion of monetary success presents a constrained notion of freedom. The intellect is not so easily marked or assessed when the depths of our emotions and the precisions of our actions are considered. Therefore, learning is freeing when students can exercise their own agency and be true to their whole experience.

I believe that as teachers struggle with tension, resistance, and being true to their awareness they are working to be soulful in their approach. I believe they do
sense how to teach in a holistic way and do know what to do although they may not trust this knowing. The more teachers share their experiences, the greater the opportunities will be for others to listen and receive the information they need to apply. We need not have to push or convince one another. In sharing, a feeling of rightness will resonate through us when the information makes sense and we are ready to receive it. Co-teaching with our students in the paradox of knowing and unknowing inspires our ability to be spiritual human beings and opens us up to true learning.
The Nature Of Mind

“Where do you come from?” asked the frog in the well.

“From the great ocean,” he replied.

“How big is your ocean?”

“It’s gigantic.”

“You mean about a quarter of the size of my well here?”

“Bigger.”

“Bigger? You mean half as big?”

“No, even bigger.”

“Is it as big as this well?”

“There’s no comparison.”

“That’s impossible! I’ve got to see this for myself.”

They set off together. When the frog from the well saw the ocean, it was such a shock that his head just exploded into pieces.

Story told by Patrul Rinpoche in “The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying”.

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REFERENCES


