

WHAT IS INTEGRAL EDUCATION?

David Marshak

In the most profound way, integral education is the sibling of integral medicine. Both are founded on a holistic conception of life.

Integral education is guided by the insight that humans are born with a unique biological, social, and spiritual identity, that humans both unfold from the dynamic of that unique identity **and** develop through an ongoing interaction between nature and nurture. So integral education begins with the root meaning of the latter word—*educere*, to draw forth from within. From an integral perspective, the purpose of education is to recognize and nurture the unfoldment of the acorn of the child into the oak of maturity. Within common human pathways of growth, each child has her or his own unique potential, gifts, and life trajectory, and integral education elicits, encourages, and supports the child's and later the teen's embodiment of the wholeness of his or her potential.

Integral education clearly recognizes that humans both have a unique identity and a social existence in which they live in relationship with other humans within the biosphere. Integral education focuses both on each unique individual **and** on each individual as a part of human society and the entire manifestation of life on the planet. So integral education involves the weaving of the individual's journey of unfoldment with her or his social identity and development. Toward this end the experiences of education are connected in age-appropriate ways to the central issues of our day, including justice, peace, ecological wisdom, sustainability, science and technology—all of our moral responsibilities as humans, given our enormous powers.

Integral educators perceive human beings as complex systems that integrate a physical domain, an emotional domain, a mental domain, and a domain of soul or spirit. (This is the most simple system of integral description; other systems include these four domains and others.) So another quality of integral education builds on the interrelated nature of the human system. The physical body, the heart (as a shorthand for the emotional domain), the mind, and the soul each unfold and grow as the child grows, and they do so in a manner that is irrevocably interrelated and interdependent. For example, when the child passes into adolescence and experiences the physical changes that take place during the puberty, the emotions deepen and intensify and the mind begins to access a more complex and abstract quality of thought. After puberty the mind and the soul can interact to bring forth a startling and expansive idealism at the core of the young person's being. Integral education engages the child in all of her or his domains in a way that encourages expression, connection, integration, and responsibility and later that evokes the teen's capacity for systems thinking, idealistic vision, sensitivity, compassion, and love.

The most evolved example we have of an educational form that embodies

the qualities of integral education is the Waldorf school curriculum, created by Rudolf Steiner in 1919. The genius of the Waldorf curriculum resides in its profoundly integral design. It incorporates a description of the path of human unfoldment from birth to age 21 with an integral engagement of the child's body, heart, mind, and soul, so that children of every age are met with activities that are likely to touch them deeply, invite their willed and full participation, and lead to learning and growth. The Waldorf curriculum engages the body (for example, movement, agility, strength, balance, coordination, training of the senses), the heart (emotional responses to story, music, drawing, and nature), the mind (language, science, mathematics, history), and the soul (aesthetics, nature, exemplary stories).

Yet for all of its brilliance as an integral system of education, the Waldorf school model has profound limitations for our times, particularly since we live in a world that has evolved considerably since 1919. Steiner did not create the Waldorf school as a finished and complete model of integral education; rather he set it up as a functioning school in a short period of time with many inexperienced teachers who needed specific directions about what they should do in the classroom. In addition, Steiner needed to establish a school that would work well in German society at the time. Steiner only had a few years to develop his educational model before he grew ill and died.

Steiner believed in evolution as the central process on this planet: biological evolution but also the more inclusive evolution of spirit, and for humans, an evolution of consciousness. An integral education for our time builds on the insights of the Waldorf curriculum, many of which have been validated by scientific inquiry over the past 50 years, but also evolves in at least several ways:

- Steiner wrote, as did his contemporary and, in many ways, his philosophical colleague, Maria Montessori, that the child needs the freedom, within safe boundaries, to take charge of his or her own learning, that within the child resides an inner teacher, an expression of soul. Sri Aurobindo, the Indian sage who lived in the same years and who wrote both about human unfoldment and education and about the evolution of humanity in words similar to those of Teilhard de Chardin, agreed about the central role of freedom in human unfoldment toward wholeness. An integral education for our times needs to center on the freedom of the child to direct her or his own learning, with the recognition that adults must be able to create safe boundaries for the child and that freedom comes with responsibility. It is not license. So the child and the teacher join together in an elaborate dance, and sometimes the lead changes hands.
- Steiner adopted the German school form of age grading, although he employed it in a revolutionary manner. Mundane German educators grouped all children of the same age together and kept them together

throughout their schooling as a tool of industrial efficiency (Horace Mann and his colleagues brought age grading to the United States in 1843). In contrast, Steiner believed that children at various ages recapitulated the prior evolutionary consciousness of the human species and, thus, curriculum at each grade level could be targeted for the consciousness of children at that age. For example, in first grade, children learn about fairy tales, folk tales and nature stories; in second grade, saints, legends, and animal fables; in third grade, old Testament stories and history, in fourth grade, Norse mythology and sagas; in fifth grade, Greek myths and other ancient civilizations, and in sixth grade, Roman and medieval history, Mohammad and Islamic culture, and Arthurian legends.

While there is value in engaging children in some of the studies that Steiner prescribes at the various ages, there is also clearly value in encouraging children of different ages to interact with each other. Younger and older children have grown up together in mixed-age groups for almost all of human history, and multi-age groupings of children promote a wide variety of pro-social learning and growth, including compassion, peer teaching, tolerance and valuing of differences, and the absence of limitations on a child's learning based on grade level norms and barriers.

There is one quality in multi-age learning environments that is profoundly naturalistic. There is another quality that promotes freedom. Both of these need to be included in integral education for our times.

- One key outcome of integral education is that each person learns to embody her or his gifts and life purposes. An aspect of this embodiment is an empowerment of each individual as a significant person in human society, so that each person enters adulthood with the power to act in the world. For this outcome to be achieved, and for children and teens to experience significant freedom within their communal learning environment, children and teens need to be engaged in the processes of institutional governance for this learning environment throughout their lives there. Right now this means involvement in some form of participatory democracy, as this is the best way we have to establish norms and resolve issues. As time goes on, learning communities may find ways to make their own governance more integral than we can now imagine.

All of this discussion assumes that integral education for children and teens will continue to take place in the near-future within a context that we recognize as a school. Schooling as we have known it is a cultural artifact of industrial society,

and it has become universalized in societies that have embraced industrial forms. It seems necessary to me that as we move further into whatever post-industrial society becomes, we must retire the meme of school and replace it with another social form. I don't know what this new meme should be, but its birthing seems essential to me.

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