

A Holistic Approach to Child and Youth Care

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Holism is a philosophical approach that has been used to shape and educate young people for hundreds of years. However, during all this time, no clear or definitive understanding or definition has been formed. In exploring this question with students and university and college professors, two general approaches in understanding Holism arose, an anthropological approach and a communal approach. Each approach offers a unique way of understanding Holism and both of these approaches offer a greater understanding of Holism and how Holism can be used to enhance Child and Youth Care practice.

A Holistic Understanding of Child and Youth Care

“The vision of human wholeness is an ancient one. It can be found in the cultures of indigenous peoples as well as in the ancient cultures of Greece, India, and China” (Miller 2005, 1). A holistic understanding is not a new concept nor is it limited to a particular culture of people group. A holistic understanding is deeply rooted in ancient history.

So the question needs to be asked, what is it about holism that has such staying power? What impact does it offer that can help us shape the lives of children and youth?

Psychologist James Hillman, former director of the C.G. Jung Institute points this out:

Mr. Objective Observer. This characterless abstraction runs corporations, constructs the International Style of architecture, writes the language of official reports. He enforces the methods of scientific research, prefers systems to people, numbers to images. He defines the educational programs and the standards for testing them. He has also succeeded in separating the practices of law, science, medicine and commerce from the character of the practitioner ... The same characterless abstraction made possible the gulag and KZ lager. The one death that has caused so much death in the past century is the death of character (Hillman 1999, 238-239).

Although Hillman is directing his comments more so to the educational system than to the field of Child and Youth Care, his observations are still important to note as they are observations from general society. For Hillman, he sees a separation of vocational practice and human character. And for Hillman, the absence of character has cause so much death and is the greatest death in the past century.

If Hillman’s observations are correct, others such as Miller (2000) and Hunter (2000) agree, how does a child and youth care practitioner respond?

Holism

A simple response is not to separate character and learning/practice. One philosophical approach that holds this perspective strongly is a Holistic approach. In general terms, Holism “attempts to nurture the

development of the whole person.” (Miller 2005, 2). For the Holistic philosophy, character, emotion, values, etc. cannot and should not be separated.

Value of Holism

Faculty Interviews

When exploring the value of a Holistic philosophy, in February, March and April of 2014, 35 professors of different teaching fields and schools, whom are also currently employed and practicing as teaching faculty in Higher Education in Manitoba, Canada, were contacted and asked about their understanding of, the value of, and practices of a Holistic approach. The following are some of their responses to the value of a holistic approach;

One respondent said, “It is valuable because it recognizes that life is never easily compartmentalized” (Respondent 11).

Another stated, “Psychology teaches us that what we think is significantly impacted by what we do, or practices and habits. Education which focuses only on the mind thus is inadequate” (Respondent 17).

One said that Holism “desires transformation, not just formation” (Respondent 4).

Finally, one respondent said that Holism “responds to/fosters whole persons, not merely experts with knowledge or skills” (Respondent 3).

Every professor that participated, without exception, believed that a Holistic approach was very valuable and meaningful. For each one, a holistic approach was the means of helping a person to go beyond just rote understanding. The goal of holism is to help shape the whole person, not just particular aspects of a person.

Student Focus Group

On April 8, 2014, several focus groups were conducted with the student leadership of Providence University in Manitoba, Canada to seek out their value of, understanding and practice of Holism. The following are some of their responses when discussing the value of holism;

One student said that Holism is valuable “because it grants you the ability to grow in all aspects of your life so that you can better apply what you’re learning to all fields” (SLA1).

Another said that Holism “meets the need of belonging” (SLB5).

Another student said “it helps to build us up as a whole person” (SLC3).

A final student said that Holism to me “is not only valuable, but vital” (SLA3).

As with the professors, every student, without exception, that participated stated that holism was very important to them as it helped them grow as a student and as a person.

Of all the precipitants involved, they held a high value of holism both within the educational structure and outside the traditional educational structure.

Understanding Holism

If Holism is valuable, then it is necessary to have a deeper understanding of what Holism truly is. To begin with, one must realize that the holistic “movement does not have a single source, a predominant proponent, or a major form or expression. Consequently, it is difficult to define” (Forbes 1996).

While conducting interviews (Feb.-Apr. 2014) and reviewing literature on the topic, most positions fall within one of two categories. They either are anthropological or communal in their perspective.

Anthropological

Those who hold the anthropological perspective view Holism, they see holism as interacting with the different components of a person. Holism “attempts to nurture the development of the whole person. This includes the intellectual, emotional, physical, social, aesthetic, and spiritual” (Miller 2005, 2). Each component of a person cannot and should not operate without engagement of the other components. For a person to truly learn something, it must involve and engage each component of the person.

One of the foundational sources used to understand this approach to Holism is Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1970). Maslow develop a theory that in order to become a well-rounded person a person needs to reach a state of development where they become self-actualized. For this to occur, certain needs need to be met. Maslow started with a five stage model in 1943, but later went to an eight stage model in 1970. The 8 stages are:

1. Biological and Physiological needs - air, food, drink, shelter, warmth, sleep, etc.
2. Safety needs - protection from elements, security, order, law, limits, stability, etc.
3. Social Needs - Belongingness and Love, - work group, family, affection, relationships, etc.
4. Esteem needs - self-esteem, achievement, mastery, independence, status, dominance, prestige, managerial responsibility, etc.
5. Cognitive needs - knowledge, meaning, etc.
6. Aesthetic needs - appreciation and search for beauty, balance, form, etc.
7. Self-Actualization needs - realizing personal potential, self-fulfillment, seeking personal growth and peak experiences.
8. Transcendence needs - helping others to achieve self-actualization

For Maslow, in order to achieve a higher level of learning, engagement, and being, the needs of the whole person must be accounted for and if they are not, then this higher level of engagement cannot occur. For the holistic facilitator, learning “can’t occur without the exertion of our higher faculties – our intuitive, aesthetic, unitive, spiritual faculties” (Lemkow 2005, 21). To truly engage a person and to help them, one must first start with basic needs and work your way up to help them with deeper and more profound concepts.

Spirituality

In terms of understanding what is meant by self-actualization in the Holistic context, it is important to note in Holistic Philosophy that “perhaps the defining aspect of holistic education is the spiritual” (Miller 2005, 2). In Holistic Philosophy, learning and spirituality cannot be separated. Spiritual development goes hand-in-hand with all other areas of learning. In regards to science and religion, “Albert Einstein defined their relationship most succinctly and memorably when he said that “religion without science is lame, and science without religion is blind” (Lemkow 2005, 22). For the Holistic facilitator, no subject matter can be taught without spirituality and spirituality cannot be separated from other subject matters. The two are fully intertwined and cannot/should not be separated.

When the topic of spirituality is approached, the lines of what faith is and religiosity often become blurred. Faith is not just holding a set of beliefs, such religious doctrinal statements, nor is faith just participating in a set of exercises such as meditation or yoga, faith is a much deeper concept.

Many scholars have written about and constructed models of faith. To give an example of how faith works within a Holistic philosophy, I will use a popular, well respected, and widely used model constructed by James Fowler (Fowler 1981).

James Fowler created a model of faith development based on seeing faith through the lens of human development. Fowler directly connected human development with the faith journey. For Fowler, faith and successful human development go hand-in-hand.

The three primary sources Fowler used to process human development are Erik Erikson (Erikson 1963), Jean Piaget (Piaget 1967), and Lawrence Kohlberg (Kohlberg 1969). For his faith understanding, he leaned on the works of Paul Tillich (Tillich 1957), H. Richard Niebuhr (Niebuhr 1960), and Wilfred Cantwell Smith (Smith 1963). Fowler then took both human development and faith development and constructed a model of faith development consisting of one pre-stage and six formal stages. The Stages are:

Undifferentiated Faith (Pre-stage)

“In the pre-stage ... the seeds of trust, courage, hope and love are fused in an undifferentiated way and contend with sensed threats of abandonment, inconsistencies and deprivations in an infant’s environment” (Fowler 1981, 121).

Intuitive-Projective Faith (Stage 1)

This stage generally “is the fantasy-filled, imitative phase in which the child can be powerfully and permanently influenced by examples, moods, actions and stories of the visible faith of primarily related adults” (Fowler 1981, 133).

This stage is the “stage of first self-awareness” (Fowler 1981, 133).

Mythic-Literal Faith (Stage 2)

This stage sees the rise of concrete operations which “leads to the curbing and ordering of the previous stage’s imaginative composing of the world” (Fowler 1981, 149). For a person in stage two, the world is “based on reciprocal fairness and an immanent justice based on reciprocity” (Fowler 1981, 149).

The major influence of faith formation for a person in this stage is story. "Story becomes the major way of giving unity and value to experience. ... For this stage the meaning is both carried and 'trapped' in the narrative" (Fowler 1981, 149).

Synthetic-Conventional Faith (Stage 3)

For a person in stage 3, their experience now extends beyond the family unit. "A number of spheres demand attention: family, school or work, peers, street society and media, and perhaps religion" (Fowler 1981, 172). In terms of a person's faith in this stage, "faith must provide a coherent orientation in the midst of that more complex and diverse range of involvements. Faith must synthesize values and information; it must provide a basis for identity and outlook" (Fowler 1981, 172).

It has been noted that while this stage is directly connected to the adolescent, "for many adults it becomes a permanent place of equilibrium" (Fowler 1981, 172). For many, they never grow out or past this stage. This stage becomes permanent for many.

Individuative-Reflective Faith (Stage 4)

This stage is where,

"the person must face certain unavoidable tensions: individuality versus being defined by a group or group membership; subjectivity and the power of one's strongly felt but unexamined feelings versus objectivity and the requirement of critical reflection; self-fulfillment or self-actualization as a primary concern versus service to and being for others; the question of being committed to the relative versus struggle with the possibility of an absolute" (Fowler 1981, 182).

Stage 4 is generally marked by two developments; the refining of the self (self-identity) and the ability to "translate symbols into conceptual meanings" (Fowler 1981, 182).

Conjunctive Faith (Stage 5)

This stage "involves the integration into self and outlook of much that was suppressed or unrecognized in the interest of Stage 4's self-certainty and conscious cognitive and affective adaptation to reality"

(Fowler 1981, 197). For this stage the symbolic is joined together again with the conceptual. This stage also involves reworking one's past by "opening to the voices of one's 'deeper self'" (Fowler 1981, 198).

Universalizing Faith (Stage 6)

Stage 6 involves the overcoming of the paradoxes that arise in Stage 5. This overcoming is "through a moral and ascetic actualization of the universalizing apprehensions" (Fowler 1981, 200). A person who arrives in this stage "becomes a disciplined, activist incarnation – a making real and tangible – of the imperatives of absolute love and justice of which Stage 5 has partial apprehensions" (Fowler 1981, 200).

Very, very few ever obtain this stage of development.

For Fowler, human development go hand-in-hand with faith development. The two are directly related and cannot be separated.

For understanding faith, this is not simply a set of beliefs or simplistic practices, this is growth in the essences of who you are.

For the holistic practitioner, faith is the development of the inner self and being. For Maslow, this the level of transcendence. For the Holistic Child and Youth practitioner, your ultimate goal should be to engage someone at this level.

Communal

A second approach to a Holistic understanding is a communal approach. Although this involves the whole person and faith, the Holistic approach is more community than individual. In this approach, the person is seen not as a separate entity, but a part of a greater community. This approach holds that "Human transformation comes in community" (Respondent 4). The old adage, 'it takes a village to raise a child' comes into play here.

One of the major sources for this perspective is systems theory. Systems Theory was first proposed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy in 1928. This theory challenged the assumption of the time that “things could be broken into individual components and the effect of each component could be discretely predicted and analyzed in a linear manner” (Stuart 2009, 273). Von Bertalanffy believed that when “there is a relationship between two or more things, and that when those things work together, they will have a different effect than applying or analyzing the effect of each thing separately” (Stuart 2009, 273).

The key slogan that was adopted by those whom hold this theory that best describes the core of Systems Theory is “The sum of the whole is greater than its parts” (Stuart 2009, 273). When a person applies Systems Thinking to any setting such as a community group, each individual of the group has a certain level of impact in the community, however when they group comes together the impact of the collective is far greater than the total sum of each individual’s impact separately.

This theory also holds that it is not possible to explore an individual part of a system without accounting for the other parts of the system. For example, when Systems Theory is applied to a family unit, also called Family Systems Theory, to pull one member of the family out of the system and deal with an individual apart from the system is not effective. This theory holds that the system, which in this case is the family, influences each part of the system.

When applying this theory to Holism, the community shapes the individual within the community. The community is greater than the individual and can help the individual become more than if the individual is outside the community.

Communal Holism highly values and centers on communal relationship. “What happens in the hallway and in the home is valuable. Day to day interaction is just as instructive, if not more, than formal instruction (Respondent 18).

For the Communal Holism practitioner, the community is the teacher and the force that shapes the student that is a participant in that particular community.

Holism and Child and Youth Care Practice

In what ways can Holism help shape and advance Child and Youth Care practice?

First, we can change the way we look at Holism from an either/or to a both/and. A Holistic approach can be both personal and communal. Child and Youth care practitioners can engage on both levels. Child and Youth Care practitioners ought to engage both on a personal or anthropological level and on a communal or relational level.

Anthropological

When participating on an anthropological level, it is common to get trapped into only engaging clients in one or two aspects of the person. If a person has been abused, the practitioner may direct their engagement of the client on a physical and emotional level. However, “when people are abused, it can affect every aspect of their lives.” (Lyness 2013, 3). For

“Teens who are abused (or have been in the past) often have trouble sleeping, eating, and concentrating ... Many people who are abused distrust others. They may feel a lot of anger toward other people and themselves, and it can be hard to make friends. Abuse is a significant cause of depression in young people. Some teens can only feel better by doing things that could hurt them like cutting or abusing drugs or alcohol. They might even attempt suicide (Lyness 2013, 3).

For a Child and Youth Care practitioner to only engage one or two aspects of the person’s being who happens to be facing this issue would fall far short of what this person needs. This issue, along with most issues, affects a person’s whole being. To be effective, the Child and Youth Care worker must engage each and every aspect of the person.

Another aspect of the anthropological is the goal to reach higher levels of engagement. For a holistic educator, to truly learn something, it must be learnt by every aspect of your being. True learning is

whole being learning. For the Child and Youth Care worker, if we wish to help children and youth have real change that is not surface level, then we need to engage their whole being and meet more than just basic needs. We need to join with them on a deep spiritual journey as they make life changing choices. This can only happen if their whole being is engaged.

Communal

This journey that Child and Youth Care worker walks with the child or youth directly brings in the second aspect of Holism, the communal aspect.

“In recent years, the centrality of relationship building and relationship as developmental support and intervention has been emphasized in the field of human development ... Because many of the children and youth served by child and youth workers have experienced many barriers to the development of attachment, social skills, and a positive self-identity, over the past years child and youth work has increasingly identified relationships as an important concern” (VanderVen 2003, 133).

Relationship is foundational to helping any child or youth. In a communal understanding, relationship helps shape people in a way no other method can. For a child or youth, relationship is the foundation of how they see themselves and the world.

Another aspect of the communal approach is closely tied to the Ecological Approach. “The ecological perspective emphasizes the interaction between persons and their physical and social environments, including cultural and political setting” (Stuart 2009, 280). This perspective accounts for social systems and how they influence the individual. The communal approach also accounts of the social systems that influence the individual, but also seeks to intentionally shape some of those systems to help the child or youth. If the child or youth was in a group home, the communal approach would take seriously the social environment of that home and intentionally shape it in such a way that it would be a community that would help the child or youth who is a part of it.

Conclusion

In all the interviews and focus groups conducted, a Holistic Approach was seen as both very valuable and by some, vital. Holism is seen as offering something that is both desired and necessary.

In understanding Holism, this can both been seen and understood as anthropological and communal. A Holistic approach is both individual and collective.

For a Holistic approach to Child and Youth Care, it involves accounting for the different aspects of an individual, taking serious the community the person is in, and engaging the community and each aspect of the person to help shape the child or youth at a deep, meaning level.

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