

## **Exploring the Potential Benefits of Holistic Education: A Formative Analysis**

Sharon Lauricella & Steph MacAskill  
University of Ontario, Canada

**Abstract** *This study examines both if and why university students believe that increased exposure to holistic principles would have been beneficial to their success after finishing secondary education. The overwhelming majority—on average about 70%— of participants agreed that had they had more exposure to holistic principles (personal identity, meaning/purpose, connections to the community, connections to the natural world, and humanitarian values) while in the K-12 system, they would have been more successful in university. Students supporting such exposure reported that a holistic education would have helped them to better choose their course of study in university, to more fully understand their career opportunities after graduation, and to be more informed about the community, natural world, and citizens with whom they interacted. Students who did not support an increased exposure to holistic principles felt that this kind of education was not an academic pursuit, was best studied in their free time, or already felt as if they had sufficient exposure to these principles.*

**Keywords** holistic education, education reform, personal identity, postsecondary preparedness

### **Introduction**

The traditional classroom setting, characterized by desks arranged neatly in rows, a teacher's desk at one end of the room, and textbook-based learning methods, has remained pervasive in North America. Both public and private schools are most often comprised of age-specific classrooms, subjects taught independently of one another, and students sitting quietly at their desks. While the curriculum has changed significantly since the turn of the twentieth century, such as in the elimination of Latin and Greek in favour of modern languages and technological skills, high-profile education reformers including Sir Ken Robinson (2011, 2013) and Geoffrey Canada (hcz.org) have called for the education system to personalize

## *Potential Benefits of Holistic Education*

teaching so as to reach students individually rather than treating the education system as an industrial, linear process that produces students who all learn and know the same information.

Curriculum development as a best practice is ongoing, and education reform as a whole has grown to take on advanced debate in issues including the inclusion of social justice (Reynolds, 2012) and developing a multicultural and international perspective (DGPE, 2014). While some education reformers (Zwaagstra, Clifton, & Long, 2010) suggest measureable changes, for instance a focus on systematic evaluation of student progress, standardized testing, and rigorous discipline enforcement, other perspectives argue that smaller class sizes (Finn, Gerber, Achilles & Boyd-Zaharias, 2001) and avoiding politically hot topics (Grille, 2005) are the keys to fostering a healthy education and well-adjusted child. Sir Ken Robinson's TED Talk (2006), arguing that the traditional classroom setting does students (and indeed, culture as a whole) a disservice by discouraging creativity, has been viewed nearly 29 million times and is the most viewed TED talk of all time. Technological advancements, for example learning with web-based tools (Kay, 2012), together with continued attention to developmentally-appropriate activities (for example, Gestwicki, 2013) have contributed to the potential for changes in both the public and private education systems.

Despite the political agenda or specific curriculum issue at hand, most educators would agree that the end goal is to equip school-age children to construct and face their futures positively and with confidence. More recent inquiry about the adequacy of contemporary educational theory and processes has addressed this objective (Gidley, 2010, p. 139). With this in mind, the traditional concept of learning can therefore be broadened, and alternative methods of educating young people and assessing their knowledge and growth is becoming increasingly welcomed. Some developments, for example charter schools, have been met with mixed results as the model of public funding can nevertheless lead to private entities taking root in the education setting (Lubienski, 2013). Other creative changes, including new ways of educating teachers so that they can best engage students, have contributed to promoting learning in areas such as STEM education (Fakayode, Pollard, Snipes, & Atkinson, 2014).

One potential, and indeed powerful, avenue for encompassing growth and change in the education system is holistic education. This broad, personalized, and exploratory educational design provides students with the opportunity to participate in innovative and well-rounded learning experiences in which they are provided with the necessary skills and tools to succeed in environments well beyond the confines of a classroom. This paper addresses the practice of holistic education, and will consider the benefits that this model facilitates. It critically analyzes the traditional education system in Canada by examining university students' retrospective reflection of their elementary and secondary education experiences in

the Ontario Public and Catholic School Boards, and whether students believe that a holistic-based experience would or would not have served them in the context of higher education.

### **Holistic education defined and refined**

A single, uniform definition of holistic education remains elusive; there are numerous ways in which holistic education has been defined in extant literature. The Holistic Education Network (2003) defines holistic education as “a multi-levelled experiential journey of discovery, expression, and mastery where all students and teachers learn and grow together” (para 1). Hare (2010) defines holistic education as “a group of beliefs, feelings, principles, and general ideas that share family resemblance” (p. 3). An earlier definition (Rinke, 1985) defines this type of education as “a functional model of education that focuses on the whole teaching-learning situation, and varies the teaching-learning strategy to meet the needs of the learner, the teacher, and the situation in an effort to attain educational outcomes greater than the sum of their parts” (p. 67). For the purpose of this paper, holistic education will be operationalized via one of the field’s most prolific scholars, Ron Miller (2000, 2012). Miller defines holistic education as a “philosophy of education based on the premise that each person finds identity, meaning, and purpose in life through connections to the community, to the natural world, and to humanitarian values such as compassion and peace” (para. 2). Miller’s definition of holistic education was chosen for the purposes of this research because it makes clear the broad spectrum of educational opportunities, and also recognizes the importance of the individual in his or her educational experience.

The Socratic recommendation to “know thyself” is integral to an understanding of holistic education. Socrates held that “the potential element of an individual is latent and concealed in nature and hence needs to be brought to surface” (Ismail & Hussan, 2009, p.231). While roots of the concept of wholism and holistic education are also credited to philosophers including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Rudolf Steiner, holistic education more formally emerged in North America between the early 1960s and mid 1970s (Paths of Learning, 2012). As a result of the ecological crisis, nuclear annihilation, chemical pollution, disappearance of traditional communities, and distance from traditional family values, educators began to question the direction and intentions of the modern world and its core values (Forbes, 1996). Holistic education was viewed as a positive and plausible response to the challenges of globalization, cultural disintegration, and ecological decline (Paths of Learning, 2012). It was during this time that educators more formally considered the concept of wholism as a necessary component to understanding the interconnected relationships between people and the world. Miller (2000, 2012) based his educational philosophy on the premise that something—and indeed anything—cannot be determined or understood by simply

## *Potential Benefits of Holistic Education*

the sum of its parts, but rather by observing the system as a whole to determine how each part behaves.

During the early 1980s, holistic education went from being an extension of a concept to a realistic and plausible system. Although there are a variety of aims and goals of holistic education offered by a diverse collection of sources, the primary objectives remain unanimous and revolve around “recognizing the innate potential of every student for intelligent, creative, and systemic thinking” (Holistic Education Network, 2003, para. 10). Holistic education is concerned with the growth of each student by allowing one to reach his or her intellectual, creative, emotional, and physical potential. It encourages the transfer of learning across various disciplines in which learners have the opportunity to openly and collectively discuss cultural, political, social, and moral contexts of their lives. “There is an emphasis on life experience and learning beyond the confines of the classroom and the formal educational environment towards education as growth, discovery and a broadening of horizons” (Hare, 2010, p.3). The ultimate goal is to expose students to environments where they are continuously experiencing and looking for new meaning and understanding. For example, Forbes (1996) describes how holistic education exemplifies how different cultural values, traditions, and practices are integrated into holistic curricula; holistic education seeks to eliminate the concept of minority groups by providing a diverse education that reflects and appeals to every culture’s values and views of who they feel they are (La Belle, 1982).

Notable examples demonstrating how holistic education has been developed into a systematic curriculum include Gidley’s (2010) introduction of how holistic theories were put into practice through the implementation of Waldorf schools. Initially developed in the early 1920’s by Rudolf Steiner, Waldorf education is an “international schooling system of approximately one thousand schools, underpinned by a holistic, spiritually-based philosophy” (Gidley, 2010, p.140). Steiner contributed significantly to the fields of spiritual science, education, agriculture, medicine, and art, and believed that holistic approaches to education would facilitate a more confident, equipped, and hopeful outlook toward the future. Waldorf education strives to educate the whole person, including what Steiner refers to as the hands, the heart, and the head. Today, there are over nine hundred schools in eighty-three countries (Association of Waldorf Schools of North America, 2012).

Another example of the implementation of holistic education principles into the curriculum is through the International Baccalaureate program. The IB program was founded in 1968 in Geneva, and is currently available to students from age 3-19 at specific venues across the UK, Europe, USA, and Canada. The IB program consists of “a challenging and distinctive program, offering an education that encompasses respect for diversity, critical thinking, community learning, and global education” (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2012). There are many

congruent values and objectives between a holistic education and the international baccalaureate program. Some of the main similarities include “demonstrating a flexible and creative approach to problem solving,” “developing and maintaining relationships through interpersonal skills,” and “promoting a strong relationship at all levels within a learning community” (Gidley, 2010, pp. 4-5). In Canada, the context within which we write, there are only a limited number of Canadian schools offering the International Baccalaureate program, thus inviting further research on how holistic education could be incorporated into the public Canadian curriculum.

In addition to developments in the holistic curriculum (Miller, 2007), holistic pedagogy has also received scholarly attention (for example, Ricci & Pritscher, 2015). Holistic styles of teaching and expectations differ significantly from that of traditional education. Forbes (1996) suggests that in holistic education settings, teachers become less of an authoritative figure who directs and controls, and more of a friend, mentor, and facilitator. The idea of delivering education from a top-down system does not exist in the holistic model, as students and teachers are meant to learn both with and from one another:

Holistic educators feel that schools must be places where the relationships we want as adults exist for the student as much as possible—where open, honest, and respectful communication is the norm; where differences between people are appreciated; where interaction is based on mutual support and not competition of hierarchy, and where the decision making process (if not engaged in by everyone at some level) is at least accepted by everyone (Forbes, 1996, p. 6).

In this type of educational environment, there is an absence of uniformity, rigid standards, continuous testing, and authoritarian control. The role of the holistic teacher is to nurture and support the child’s whole developmental needs of mind, body, and spirit; it is believed that instructors who can keep their work fresh, current, alive, and relevant to students will be of great value (Luvmour, 2001). While literature exists on the objectives of the holistic educator, best practices pertaining to requirements and credentials for the holistic educator have not yet been clearly outlined. Additional research on the process and training involved in being a holistic educator is an opportunity for future research.

Despite the variety of perceived benefits of holistic education, there are also caveats to holistic education given its diversion from tradition and deep-seated expectations. One of the main concerns is the lack of consistency and structure in a holistic curriculum. Currently, the traditional and formal education system in Canada is standardized by the provincial government. There are specific performance measures that must be met in order to move from one grade level to another because in their absence, it is assumed students may not have the necessary

## *Potential Benefits of Holistic Education*

knowledge and skills from which to build upon for the next standardized level of learning. Further, some concerns exist in holistic education regarding challenges associated with time required of educators. The continuous tailoring and revamping of lesson plans to meet the diverse needs of each student would be exceptionally time consuming on the part of the instructor. Further, students would arguably need to be in school for a much longer period of time, ultimately creating an economic burden on the education system. A final criticism of holistic principles is that it would be extremely difficult for post-secondary institutions to develop a standardized list of prerequisites, as teaching subjects and evaluation methods would not be as clear as they currently stand. Despite such criticisms that the education system cannot afford to accommodate itself to every student, Sir Ken Robinson (2006) argues that we can't afford *not* to do so.

The incorporation of holistic methods in teaching and learning is a response to the call for meaningful, positive reform in education which recognizes and meets the unique learning style and needs of every student. This paper is a student-focused analysis of what current university students feel was missing or inadequate about their K-12 education in Ontario, Canada, and whether the elements of a holistic education would have been beneficial. While education reform focuses on what *educators* believe is beneficial to the teaching and learning process, and some studies are results-based (for example, the remarkable success of the Harlem Childrens Zone, see: [www.hcz.org](http://www.hcz.org)), to our knowledge, no studies have asked postsecondary *students* what they believe was missing from their learning experience. Current postsecondary students are a helpful group from which to gain perspective on education because they are uniquely poised outside of the K-12 system and have a retrospective view on their own education, and yet are temporally close to their K-12 experiences, therefore in a unique place to remember specific experiences relating to teaching and learning. This research seeks to fill a gap in understanding the potential benefits of holistic education by asking postsecondary students about what was both inherent and absent from their K-12 experiences, and how they perceive their education as helpful to their current success. While the holistic education rubric is broad, and discussion of this topic includes curriculum, pedagogy, contemplation, and both teaching and learning, we focus in this investigation on the student perception of their learning experiences and objectives so as to create a more specific focus for this investigation. We attempt to answer the following research question:

Do current university students believe that a K-12 education based on holistic principles would have been beneficial to their success after graduation from high school?

## Method

Following approval by the university research ethics board, an invitation and link to an online, anonymous survey was sent electronically by both authors to Ontario university students from both authors' professional, personal, and social networks. Participants were required to be a current undergraduate student in Ontario and a graduate from either a public or Catholic secondary school in Ontario. The final number of complete surveys equalled 106.

Of the 106 respondents, 74% (n=78) were female, and 26% (n=28) were male. Of the participants, most (47%) graduated from high school in 2008 and 2009. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 27. Mean age (in years) was 21. Most respondents (65%, n=69) graduated from the public school board, while about one-third (35%, n=37) graduated from the Catholic school board. First year students comprised 4% (n=4) of the participants, second year students 28% (n=30), third year students 17% (n=18), fourth year students comprised the majority at 37% (n=39), and fifth year students 14% (n=15) of the participants. Both qualitative and quantitative questions were included in the survey; Appendix A contains the survey instrument in full.

Participants were asked whether it would have been beneficial to their success after high school if a variety of specific holistic principles had been incorporated into their K-12 educational experiences. Participants were also asked, in open-ended format, to describe *why* each holistic area would have been beneficial or not beneficial to their success after graduating from high school. The holistic principles explored in the survey were in keeping with Miller's operationalization of holistic education, and asked participants to reflect upon their experiences (or lack thereof) in the following areas throughout their K-12 education:

- a. personal identity (who you are, what you believe, your opinions about particular issues such as politics, religion, or philosophy);
- b. meaning and purpose (why you are here, unique talents that you have);
- c. connections to the community (service experience with local organizations, interactions with places such as museums, libraries, and/or nonprofits);
- d. connections to the natural world (experience with local ecosystems, mountains, the oceans, astronomy, and/or a deeper understanding of human physiology and anatomy); and
- e. humanitarian values (compassion, peace, equality).

The open-ended questions yielded 560 comments from participants. A grounded theoretical approach (Charmaz, 2006) was used to analyze the qualitative comments. Initial coding on a line-by-line basis (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 50-51) was performed by both authors. A focused coding guide was created following

## *Potential Benefits of Holistic Education*

discussion (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 57-60) which separated positive comments about a holistic education (in other words, comments that espouse the benefits of a holistic education) from negative comments (or, those in which the participant did not recognize benefits) and resulted in focused categories for responses to each question. Inter-rater reliability on the qualitative data was 98%.

### **Results**

#### *Personal identity*

The large majority of participants (82%, n=87) indicated that learning more about personal identity (who you are, what you believe, your opinions about particular issues such as politics, religion, or philosophy) would have been beneficial to their success after graduating from high school, while 18% (n=19) indicated that it would not have been beneficial.

There were a total of 122 comments in response to the open-ended question regarding the opportunity to learn more about personal identity. Comments indicating that learning more about personal identity *would* have been beneficial focused on: development of oneself (development of one's beliefs, values, and self-confidence); academic study (clarification of the area that the student eventually chose to study in postsecondary education); career (a deeper understanding of one's chosen career area); and academic preparation (knowledge relevant to one's chosen course of study in postsecondary education). Comments indicating that learning more about personal identity *would not* have been beneficial focused on personal identity being a non-academic issue (it was irrelevant to one's success in postsecondary education), and personal education (personal identity is unsuitable to the education system, or something that one would/should discover outside of the education system).

Table 1: Personal identity comments by category

Category	Comments
Development of oneself (beneficial)	36%
Academic study (beneficial)	17%
Career (beneficial)	14%
Personal education (beneficial)	11%
Personal preparation (beneficial)	9%
Academic preparation (not beneficial)	7%
Non-academic (not beneficial)	7%

Table 1 shows the frequency of comments regarding learning more about personal identity. Close to 90% of the qualitative comments explained how or why learning about personal identity would have been beneficial to participants' success after high school, while the remainder explained why it would not have been beneficial.

*Meaning and purpose*

Almost three-quarters of the participants (74%, n=78) indicated that learning more about their meaning and purpose in life (i.e., why they are here, unique talents they have, etc.) throughout their K-12 education would have been beneficial to their success after graduating from high school, while 26% (n=28) indicated that it would not have been beneficial.

There were a total of 109 comments in response to the open-ended question about the opportunity to learn more about one’s meaning and purpose. Comments indicating that learning more about meaning and purpose *would* have been beneficial focused on one’s personal direction (individual capabilities, strengths, personal path, and confidence); career (a deeper understanding of one’s chosen career area); academic study (clarification of the area that the student eventually chose to study in postsecondary education); and individuality (what makes one unique). Comments indicating that learning more about meaning and purpose *would not* have been beneficial focused on meaning and purpose being a non-academic issue (it was irrelevant to one’s success in postsecondary education); more of a personal education (personal identity is unsuitable to the education system, or something that one would/should discover outside of the education system); and cognitive immaturity (the participant believed that he/she was not ready to learn about meaning and purpose while they were in the K-12 system).

Table 2: Meaning and purpose by category

Category	Percentage
Purpose/personal direction (beneficial)	43%
Career (beneficial)	14%
Academic study (beneficial)	14%
Individuality (beneficial)	2%
Non-academic (not beneficial)	14%
Personal education (not beneficial)	9%
Cognitive immaturity (not beneficial)	4%

Table 2 shows the frequency of comments regarding learning more about meaning and purpose. Almost three-quarters (73%) of the comments in response to learning about meaning and purpose expressed the benefits that participants perceived to this kind of exposure, while just over a quarter (27%) explained why learning about meaning and purpose would not have been beneficial.

*Connections to the community*

Nearly all of the participants (90%, n=95) expressed that the opportunity to experience connections to the community (i.e., service experience with local organization, interactions with places such as museums, libraries, and/or non-profits) during their K-12 education would have been beneficial to their success

## Potential Benefits of Holistic Education

after graduating from high school; 10% (n=11) indicated that more exposure to the community would not have been beneficial.

There were a total of 118 comments in response to the question about the opportunity to experience connections with the community. Comments indicating that connecting with the community *would* have been beneficial focused on developing a sense of self (character building, creating positive relationships with others); building a career (networking, resume building); connections to the community are of practical use in everyday life (such as in where to turn for products, services, help, or advice); and community connections would be beneficial to deciding a course of academic study. Comments indicating that building connections with the community would *not* have been beneficial indicated that community connections are not important, and that the participant already felt as if they had sufficient knowledge in this area.

Table 3: Connections to the community by category

Category	Percentage
Self (beneficial)	33%
Career (beneficial)	27%
Practical Use (beneficial)	25%
Academic Study (beneficial)	3%
Sufficient Knowledge (not beneficial)	8%
Non-important (not beneficial)	4%

Table 3 shows the frequency of comments about experiencing connections to the community. While 88% of the comments made by participants explained the perceived benefits of having created more connections to the community, just 12% suggested that community connections would not have been beneficial to the participants' later success.

### *Connections to the natural world*

When asked whether the opportunity to learn more about their connections to the natural world (experience with local ecosystems, mountains, the oceans, astronomy, and/or a deeper understanding of human physiology and anatomy) during their K-12 education would have been beneficial to their success after graduating from high school, 66% (n=70) indicated yes, while 34% (n=36) indicated no.

There were a total of 104 comments relating to experiencing connections to the natural world. Comments indicating that connections to the natural world would have been beneficial included understanding ecological benefits, benefits to oneself (practical knowledge about the environment, health benefits), and a knowledge about the natural world contributing positively to the participants' academic study and career. Comments indicating that connections to the natural world would *not* have been beneficial showed that participants believed that this kind of knowledge

was irrelevant to them personally, academically, and in their careers. Participants also reported that connections to the natural world in the K-12 system would not have been beneficial to them because they already have sufficient knowledge in this area, or that they were not intellectually ready to study this information.

Table 4: Connections to the natural world by category

Category	Percentage
Ecological Benefits (beneficial)	31%
Self (beneficial)	21%
Academic Study (beneficial)	12%
Career (beneficial)	4%
Irrelevant Personal (not beneficial)	12%
Irrelevant Academic (not beneficial)	8%
Irrelevant Career (not beneficial)	7%
Sufficient Knowledge (not beneficial)	3%
Cognitive Immaturity (not beneficial)	1%

Table 4 shows that 68% of the comments from respondents indicated that connections to the natural world would have been beneficial after finishing secondary education. Participants reflecting on holistic principles were less enthusiastic about the potential for increased exposure to the natural world in their K-12 education than other areas; 31% of the comments from respondents indicated that opportunities to connect with the natural world would not have been beneficial to their future after high school.

*Humanitarian values*

Just over three-quarters of the participants (76%, n=81) indicated that having the opportunity to learn about humanitarian values (such as compassion, peace, and equality) throughout their K-12 education would have been beneficial to their success after graduating from high school; 24% (n=25) indicated that it would not have been beneficial.

There were a total of 108 comments relating to the potential to have learned more about humanitarian values. Qualitative comments expressing the positive aspects of learning more about humanitarian values focused on learning more about equality and diversity (generosity, respect, reduction of bullying, cooperation, improved communication, sympathy, empathy, and appreciation), children (as respected citizens), community involvement (organizations focused on peace), conflict (or reduction of violence), and career opportunities or planning. Comments suggesting that learning more about humanitarian values while in the K-12 system were not beneficial indicated that participants believed that they already knew enough about humanitarian values, and that this kind of learning was irrelevant to their academic success after high school.

## *Potential Benefits of Holistic Education*

Table 5: Humanitarian values by category

Category	Percentage
Equality and Diversity (beneficial)	61%
Conflict (beneficial)	5%
Community Involvement (beneficial)	4%
Children (beneficial)	3%
Career (beneficial)	1%
Sufficient Knowledge (not beneficial)	15%
Irrelevant Academic (not beneficial)	12%

Table 5 shows that the majority of comments regarding learning more about humanitarian values focused on its potential benefits; 73% of comments relating to this survey question explained why learning more about this area would have been beneficial to later success, and 27% expressed that increased exposure would not have been beneficial.

### **Discussion**

Results of this study showed a clear and positive response from current university students to have learned more about holistic principles while in the K-12 system. In all five areas of holistic education (personal identity, meaning and purpose, connections to the community, connections to the natural world, and humanitarian values), between 90% and 66% of participants reported that it would have been beneficial to their success after high school to have had the opportunity to learn more in these areas. Each of the holistic principles examined in this study will be addressed here in turn.

#### *Personal Identity*

Participants showed an overwhelming desire to have learned more about personal identity, for 82% of participants agreed that it would have been beneficial to have learned more about who they are, what they believe, and their opinions about political, religious, or philosophical issues. Qualitative responses to this question indicated this holistic principle would have assisted with increased confidence, a clearer direction in life, and sexuality/gender identity. With almost 90% of qualitative comments suggesting the potential benefits of learning more about personal identity, it is clear that current university students see this as an under-served area in the K-12 system. One respondent reported that “standardized education [is] soul-crushing and a more personalized learning method would have opened a lot more doors.” Another reported that, “coming to terms with my homosexuality would have been easier with this type of supportive/encouraging education system.” One-third of participant comments relating to personal identity focused on development of personal values, and it is clear that students feel the need

for more personal expression and expansion than is available in the current system.

Participants also indicated that learning more about who they are would have allowed them to better understand which path would help them to achieve their career goals. One participant stated, “I believe that knowing myself better would have allowed me to make a more educated decision as to what field of study I went into, as well as what career would be most suitable for my personality and strengths.” Almost 20% of participants reported that learning more about personal identity would have had substantial benefits for their future academic success, as it would have better prepared them for university, assisted in determining a suitable undergraduate program, and would have significantly helped with course selection. All universities, regardless of calibre, seek to retain students both at the institution and in the student’s program of study. With an increased focus on personal identity at the secondary level, it is likely that students will feel more confident and prepared to pursue the undergraduate institution and program to which they are best suited, and will move through the post-secondary system with success.

#### *Meaning and purpose*

Given three-quarters of participants responded it would have been beneficial to have learned more about their personal meaning and purpose before entering university, this holistic principle is clearly another area in which students felt as if they needed additional exposure. Qualitative comments showed that combined, over 70% of participants believed that incorporation of this principle would have been beneficial to their personal direction, academic study, and career. Participants in this study expressed a desire to have had exposure to an explorative environment where they would have felt comfortable to better understand both where and what they might like to study after completing secondary education. One participant’s comment, illustrative of many, indicated that “[better understanding my meaning and purpose] would truly be beneficial because it would help me determine what I would like to do in the future. At 24, and soon to be graduating from university, I still have no clue what I want to do after graduation.” Qualitative data showed that participants felt unsure about what they wanted to study in university, and also felt unsure of what they were best suited to do after they complete postsecondary education. Participants saw this lack of clarity as a detriment, and wished that they had a deeper understanding of how they could contribute positively as a professional and an individual. An increase in activities focusing on finding one’s purpose would better equip students with requisite knowledge and tools to pursue a post-secondary program and subsequent career that complements their strengths and passions.

#### *Connections to community*

The holistic principle in which results showed the most notable desire to have increased exposure was in connections to the community. With 90% of participants

## *Potential Benefits of Holistic Education*

agreeing that service opportunities with local organizations would have been beneficial to their future success, it is clear that university students in this study recognized a need for increased interaction with businesses, services, or nonprofits in the local area. One third of participants felt that more interaction with community organizations while in the K-12 system would have helped with personal character development and creating positive relationships with others. One participant expressed that this opportunity would lead to “less selfish people, where people would be more willing to help others.” Another commented that “if there was a connection to the community, then there would be less criminals, less troubled youth, more friendly neighborhoods, less ghettos, and more awareness of the everyday struggles.” Participants felt that relationship building between citizens and local organizations should begin early, and that waiting until one needs an organization or service, or until one finishes secondary education, is too late.

Over a quarter of participants commented that building strong connections in their communities would have been beneficial to their careers by helping to build experience, which students perceived as giving them a competitive edge in the job search before they graduate from university. This result is interesting because there does exist a required 40 hour community service obligation for Ontario secondary students. However, it is clear from qualitative comments in this project that the explanation and significance of this service obligation is lacking in secondary curricula. One student stated:

There are no classes or programs to explain why this [40 hours of community service] is important. If there were, I believe a larger majority of students, including myself, could have furthered real life experience... This could have been an excellent opportunity to volunteer and learn about possible careers and what it means to volunteer.

Another quarter of qualitative statements from participants about connections to the community focused on the practical use of this kind of education. Current university students in this project expressed that the current public education curricula lacks instruction of practical skills to prepare students for the “real world.” One respondent shared that connections to the community would have helped her to “get a hands on experience and provide more knowledge that textbooks can't provide.” Participants felt that the opportunity to interact with the community and experience hands-on learning would have helped prepare them for the non-academic component of university, including moving away from home and learning to take care of themselves, which often includes seeking out and making contact with local organizations. For example, one respondent commented that, “If I needed help, I would know where to go and have more options for resources.”

### *Natural world*

While “making connections with the natural world” was the holistic principle with which participants resonated least in this project, still two thirds (66%) agreed that learning more about local ecosystems, mountains, or human physiology would have been beneficial to their success after secondary school. Respondents indicated that connections to the natural world would have been beneficial to their personal fitness and health, an issue with which millions of North Americans continue to struggle. One respondent stated that, “having a deeper understanding of human physiology and anatomy might have helped when people moved away to university, giving people a better sense of how to take care of themselves without the aid of a parent.”

Qualitative comments also focused on the potential ecological benefits of learning experiences regarding the natural world. Respondents expressed that this connection could have created a greater appreciation for our earth, ignited an interest in history and geography, exposed people to nature rather than constantly being saturated in technology, and been helpful in understanding ecological concerns like global warming. For example, one respondent shared that connections to the natural world “would have provided an appreciation for the environment, made me more conscious of decisions I make that affect the environment, [and] motivate me to protect it.” This comment, for example, is meaningful in the context of western culture, which is characterized by individualism and materialism; Norgaard (2011) has shown the scepticism, apathy, and denial associated with climate change. Increased focus on not only environmental sensitivities and challenges, but also potential avenues for alternatives and change are of increasing importance in learning experiences.

Although the clear majority of respondents in this project supported increased exposure and education relating to the natural world in the K-12 system, this was the area in which the lowest proportion of students expressed a desire to have learned more. This may be in part due to the survey sample. We did not collect data on participants’ course of study or departmental major; it is possible that the sample may be comprised of students in social science or humanities areas, who would perceive an understanding of the natural world to be less important than, for example, natural or health sciences students. An area of future research could include a closer analysis of undergraduate student desire for holistic education based on their course of study, and which areas of holistic learning they deemed themselves lacking or having as complete.

### *Humanitarian values*

Over three-quarters of survey participants expressed a desire for increased exposure to humanitarian values in the K-12 system. Qualitative data showed that over 60% of respondents expressed that they believed that a deeper understanding of compassion and peace would result in social benefits such as equality and diversity.

## *Potential Benefits of Holistic Education*

Participants cited qualities including generosity, respect, bullying reduction, cooperation, improved communication, sympathy/empathy, and appreciation for others as important results of an education focused on humanitarian values. A consistent reflection in qualitative comments was that there exists in our culture a lack of compassion and a lack of the ability to sympathize and empathize with others. One respondent expressed that:

...throughout high school you are taught ‘respect, respect, respect’. Though this is a great value to instill, it beats around the more important values of being compassionate, acting in peaceful ways, and practicing equality to all we meet. Being respectful cannot be demonstrated without learning how to be compassionate to those who are different from us. We don't all have money, or material value, but we all have the ability to learn and practice humanitarian values in school where we can create an inclusive environment.

Respondents expressed a desire to understand the humanity in their peers and their communities, and envisaged a future with fewer tragedies like bullying, school shootings, and suicides if holistic principles including humanitarian values were and had been incorporated into the K-12 curriculum.

### *Lack of support for holistic principles*

This project indicated a clear support for learning more about holistic principles including personal identity, meaning and purpose, connections to community, connections to the natural world, and humanitarian values. On average, the data showed a 70:30 ratio of favorable to non-favorable responses to the opportunity to have pursued a holistic education. The 30% of responses indicating that holistic principles would *not* be helpful to future success were qualified by comments indicating that such an education was “not academic,” should be done in one’s own time (i.e., not in the formal education system), or that participants already had sufficient knowledge of the principle in question. For example, one respondent who deemed holistic education to be unacademic responded that, “this [study of meaning and purpose] would just take away from more important subjects like math and science.” Respondents who did not perceive the benefits of holistic principles examined in this study commented that they should be done in one’s own time: “This [learning of meaning and purpose] obviously cannot be accomplished while in school and I do not believe that someone can teach you what your purpose is. That is something you need to figure out on your own, in your own time.” Comments illustrative of respondents’ sense that they were already sufficiently knowledgeable in holistic principles included, “I feel I had adequate opportunity learning about these topics [humanitarian values learnt from school curricula

inclusions].”

It is important to note that university students who did not support an increased exposure to holistic principles did not perceive such an education as detrimental; rather, such principles were perceived as either inappropriate for the formal education system as it is currently constructed, or that students already felt prepared and knowledgeable in these areas. It would be meaningful to conduct the same survey with university graduates after they complete their postsecondary education and have been working for several years to see if the perception of holistic principles would have changed with more exposure to a professional environment. It would also be helpful to analyze the data relative to the public and Catholic education system. Given that the Catholic system includes a focus on religious education, it may be possible that students in this system experienced more exposure to principles including humanitarian values and personal identity.

A discussion of gender is important in addressing the results of this study; given that almost three-quarters (75%) of participants in this project were female, results are primarily indicative of university women’s experiences via the K-12 system. A closer look at gender differences is an avenue for future research relating to holistic learning, as the desire for exposure to issues such as personal identity and meaning/purpose may be a gender-specific phenomenon. While the current formative analysis highlights the clear desire for increased experiences with holistic learning, particularly with regard to connections to the community, a gender-specific analysis of this data would be illustrative of differences that university students experience regarding their decision to attend and what to study in university. It is possible that some areas of holistic education as operationalized in this study appeal more to one gender in particular; further analysis would address this potential difference.

## **Conclusion**

This project was designed to provide insight into both if and why current university students believe that increased exposure to holistic principles would have been beneficial to their success after high school. Current university students in Ontario were asked whether they believed that experience with five areas of holistic education (personal identity, meaning/purpose, connections to the community, connections to the natural world, and humanitarian values) would have been beneficial to them after finishing their secondary education. The overwhelming majority—on average about 70%—of participants agreed that had they more exposure to holistic principles while in the K-12 system, they would have been more successful in university. Students supporting experience with holistic principles reported that a holistic education would have helped them to better choose their course of study in university, to more fully understand their career opportunities after graduation, and to be more informed about the community,

## *Potential Benefits of Holistic Education*

natural world, and citizens with whom they interact. Students who did not support an increased exposure to holistic principles felt that this kind of education was not an academic pursuit, was best studied in their own time, or already felt as if they had sufficient exposure to these principles.

Given the strong support for increased exposure to holistic principles, particularly in the areas of personal identity and connections to the community, current undergraduate students feel the need to explore their strengths, interests, and surroundings before attending postsecondary education. These results are in keeping with current efforts in education reform, perhaps best illustrated by Sir Ken Robinson (2006), who strongly criticizes the structure of the current education system in that it not only does not support exploration, but also quashes it. A holistic education, inclusive of the principles operationalized by Miller (2000, 2012), is a way to empower students to explore their own strengths so as to discover and innovate to the best of their abilities.

Although our study sample was small it is likely given the high 70:30 ratio *for* holistic education, that students (especially females) want both the opportunity and ability to know themselves and their communities better, and recognize the benefits of increased exposure to holistic principles in understanding their future potential as students and citizens. Steps toward holistic learning are meaningful in making progress toward a more fulfilling, creative, functional education for students both before and during university studies.

### **Appendix A: Survey instrument**

1. I consent to participate in the research project as described in the email invitation sent by [authors]. I am aware that this survey is completely anonymous, and I am aware that there is no way of identifying my survey document. By submitting my answers to this survey, I give consent to the researcher(s) to use my responses to the survey. Given the anonymity of the survey, I am aware that it is not possible to withdraw my answers to the survey once I submit it.

a. I consent

b. I do not consent (if this is chosen, survey concludes)

2. I certify that I am currently a university student in Ontario and that I graduated from a public or catholic high school in Ontario within the last 10 years.

a. Yes

b. No (if this is chosen, survey concludes)

3. I certify that I am over age 18.

a. Yes

b. No (if this is chosen, survey concludes)

4. What is your sex?

- a. Female
- b. Male
- c. Prefer not to answer

5. Please provide the year that you graduated from high school: \_\_\_\_\_

6. Please provide your age (in years) as of today: \_\_\_\_\_

7. From which school board did you graduate?

- a. Public
- b. Catholic

8. In which year of university are you currently in?

- a. First year
- b. Second year
- c. Third year
- d. Fourth year
- e. Fifth year

*Imagine that, throughout your K-12 education, you had the opportunity to learn more about your personal identity (i.e., who you are, what you believe, your opinions about particular issues such as politics, religion, or philosophy).*

9. Do you believe that this would have been beneficial to your success after you graduated from high school?

- a. Yes
- b. No

10. Please briefly describe WHY learning more about your personal identity would have been beneficial or not beneficial to your success after graduating from high school.

[open-ended question]

*Imagine that, throughout your K-12 education, you had the opportunity to learn more about your meaning and purpose in life (i.e., why you are here, unique talents that you have).*

*Potential Benefits of Holistic Education*

11. Do you believe that this would have been beneficial to your success after you graduated from high school?

- a. Yes
- b. No

12. Please describe WHY learning more about your meaning and purpose in life would have been beneficial or not beneficial to your success after graduating from high school.

[open-ended question]

*Imagine that, throughout your K-12 education, you had the opportunity to experience connections to your community (i.e., service experience with local organizations, interactions with places such as museums, libraries, and/or nonprofits).*

13. Do you believe that this would have been beneficial to your success after you graduated from high school?

- a. Yes
- b. No

14. Please describe WHY the opportunity to experience connections to your community would or would not have been beneficial to your success after graduating from high school.

[open-ended question]

*Imagine that, throughout your K-12 education, you had the opportunity to learn more about your connections to the natural world (i.e., experience with local ecosystems, mountains, the oceans, astronomy, and/or a deeper understanding of human physiology and anatomy).*

15. Do you believe that this would have been beneficial to your success after you graduated from high school?

- a. Yes
- b. No

16. Please describe WHY the opportunity to experience connections to the natural world would or would not have been beneficial to your success after graduating from high school.

[open-ended question]

Imagine that, throughout your K-12 education, you had the opportunity to learn about humanitarian values (such as compassion, peace, and equality).

17. Do you believe that this would have been beneficial to your success after you graduated from high school?

- a. Yes
- b. No

18. Please describe WHY the opportunity to learn more about humanitarian values would or would not have been beneficial to your success after graduating from high school.

[open-ended question]

19. If there is anything else relevant to your feelings about your K-12 educational experience that you would like to share, please enter it here:

[open-ended question]

## References

- Association of Waldorf Schools of North America. (2012). Waldorf education: A brief overview. Retrieved from [http://www.whyywaldorfworks.org/02\\_W\\_Education/history.asp](http://www.whyywaldorfworks.org/02_W_Education/history.asp)
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Sage.
- DGPE (Developing a global perspective for educators). (2014). Developing a global perspective for educators: Welcome. Retrieved from <http://www.developingaglobalperspective.ca/welcome-intro/#more-1>
- Fakayode, S. O., Pollard, D. A., Snipes, V. T., & Atkinson, A. (2014, June 14). Offering a geoscience professional development program to promote science education and provide hands-on experiences of k-12 science educators. *Journal of Chemical Education*. doi: 10.1021/ed4007502
- Finn, J., Gerber, S., Achilles, C., & Boyd-Zaharias, J. (2001). The enduring effects of small classes. *Teachers College Record*, 103(2), 145-183. Retrieved from: <http://www.sfu.ca/~jcnesebit/EDUC220/ThinkPaper/FinnGerber2001.pdf>
- Forbes, S. H. (1996). Values in holistic education. Retrieved from <http://home.datacomm.ch/ganjavi/VALUES-IN-HOLISTIC-EDUCATION.pdf>
- Gestwicki, C. (2013). *Developmentally appropriate practice: Curriculum and*

*development in early education*. Boston: Cengage Learning.

Gidley, J. M. (2010). Holistic Education and Visions of Rehumanized Futures. *Rose Journals*, 1(2), 139-147. Retrieved from

<http://www.rosejournal.com/index.php/rose/article/viewFile/37/70>

Grille, R. (2005). *Parenting for a peaceful world*. Woollahara, New South Wales: Longueville Media.

Hare, J. (2010). Holistic education: An interpretation for teachers in the IB programmes. International Baccalaureate Organization. Retrieved from

[http://blogs.ibo.org/ositionpapers/files/2010/09/Holistic-education\\_John-Hare.pdf](http://blogs.ibo.org/ositionpapers/files/2010/09/Holistic-education_John-Hare.pdf)

Harlem Children's Zone. (2014). Harlem Children's Zone. Retrieved from

<http://hcz.org/>

The Holistic Education Network. (2003). What is holistic education? Retrieved from <http://www.hent.org/intro2.htm>

International Baccalaureate Organization. (2012). Benefits of the IB. Retrieved from <http://globalengage.ibo.org/>

Ismail, H., & Hassan, A. (2009). Holistic education in Malaysia. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, 9(2), 231-237. Retrieved from

[http://www.eurojournals.com/ejss\\_9\\_2\\_05.pdf](http://www.eurojournals.com/ejss_9_2_05.pdf)

Kay, R. H. (2012). Analyzing the use of video podcasts in middle school mathematics classrooms. *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology*,

*Potential Benefits of Holistic Education*

38(2), 1-20. Retrieved from

<http://www.cjlt.ca/index.php/cjlt/article/view/684>

La Belle, T. J. (1982). Formal, non-formal and informal education: A holistic perspective on lifelong learning. *International Review of Education*, 28(2), 159-175. doi: 10.1007/BF00598444

Lubienski, C. (2013). Privatising form or function? Equity, outcomes, and influence in American charter schools. *Oxford Review of Education*, 39(4), 498-513. doi: 10.1080/03054985.2013.821853

Luvmour, J. (2001). Education and the consciousness of the developing child. *ENCOUNTER: Education for Meaning and Social Justice*, 24 (4), 15-23. Retrieved from <http://salmonberryschool.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Education-and-the-Consciousness-of-the-Developing-Child.pdf>

Miller, J. P. (1988/2007). *The holistic curriculum*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Miller, R. (2000). A brief introduction to holistic education. Retrieved from <http://www.psicopolis.com/Psicomunita/learncomm/miller5.htm>

Miller, R. (2012). What is holistic education? Retrieved from <http://www.psicopolis.com/Psicomunita/learncomm/miller5.htm>

Norgaard, K. (2011). *Living in denial: Climate change, emotions, and everyday life*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Reynolds, C. (2012, 31 October). Why are schools brainwashing our children?

*Macleans*. Retrieved from <http://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/why-are-schools-brainwashing-our-children/>

Ricci, C. & Pritscher, C. P. (2015). The path towards democracy: Holistic education and critical pedagogy. *Holistic Pedagogy*, 1(121-127).

Rinke, W. J. (1985). Holistic education: An answer? *Training and Development Journal*, 39(8), 67-68. doi: 10.1016/S0022-3182(86)80001-2

Robinson, K. (2006). How schools kill creativity. Retrieved from [http://www.ted.com/talks/ken\\_robinson\\_says\\_schools\\_kill\\_creativity](http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity)

Robinson, K. (2011). *Out of our minds: Learning to be creative*. West Sussex, UK: Capstone.

Robinson, K. (2013). How to escape education's death valley. Retrieved from [http://www.ted.com/talks/ken\\_robinson\\_how\\_to\\_escape\\_education\\_s\\_death\\_valley](http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_how_to_escape_education_s_death_valley)

Zwaagstra, M., Clifton, R., & Long, J. (2010). *What's wrong with our schools: And how we can fix them*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.

### Author Details

Sharon Lauricella (Corresponding author), is Associate Professor at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology, Faculty of Social Science and Humanities. UOIT, 55 Bond Street East, Oshawa, ON, L1G 0A5, Canada. Email: sharon.lauricella@uoit.ca

Steph MacAskill is a teacher in the Durham District School Board, Ontario, Canada. Email: s.macaskill13@gmail.com



This work by Sharon Lauricella & Steph MacAskill is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/)