

The Integral Child

Reading Time: 15-18 minutes

“Transformative learning rests on an enriched view of the human being, one that affirms our multidimensional nature and fundamental malleability.” from Palmer, P. J., & Zajonc, A. *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal*. John Wiley and Sons, p. 107, 2010.

What does it mean to *behold* a sunset?^[1] What does it mean to be in *awe* of the migration patterns of whales, hummingbirds or the red knot sandpiper?^[2] What does it mean to be *fascinated* by the crystalline symmetry of snowflakes or the spirals of nautilus shells, fiddle-head ferns and galaxies? What does it mean to be *enchanted* by the Milky Way while lying on your back at 11,000 feet staring into the night sky?^[3] What does it mean to *revere* the lives of those ancestors whose intimacy with the ocean allowed them to navigate and migrate across the Pacific in sailing canoes? Or *revere* the upstream pilgrimages of chinook salmon to their ancestral spawning grounds? What does it mean to *wonder* about the age of an ancient bristlecone pine tree^[4] or the reaction of the first humans to encounter the Grand Canyon so many millennia ago? What does it mean to be deeply *curious* about the experiences of the bees that sweeten your tea with their honey? What does it mean to “think outside the box”?

While perhaps nobody would deny that these kinds of experiences are innately human, they aren't that easy to describe, much less quantify or measure. They are primarily felt senses, inner and non-cognitive in nature. Fascination may never be reduced to math equations like the general theory of relativity. Just as importantly, how often do we take the opportunity to actively seek out and experience *beholding* or *witnessing*, *awe*, *fascination*, *enchantment*, *reverence*, *wonder*, *curiosity* or *generative creativity*? The cup of our lives is often so filled to the brim with the day-to-day tasks of work, meals, parenting, family, social media and so forth that these other qualities that are part of our human inheritance often fall to the wayside and go dormant. Yet they, along with many other non-cognitive ways of knowing and experiencing the world, are an integral part of our full capacities as *Homo sapiens* and, therefore, key ingredients for deepening our *ecosocial literacy*. Ecosocial literacy highlights and brings to the foreground the full spectrum of human beings and what we mean by the term “whole child”. I propose the term, *integral child* (or human) to bring awareness to all of these potentials we share as humans. They don't exist separate from one another. Despite what our modern society promotes, we're not cognitive in one setting (like school) and non-cognitive in others. All of these capacities are there, waiting to be called up, activated and drawn upon. They inform and enrich one another.

Our recent 400-year deification of science, the scientific method, the separation of everything from its interrelationships (including ourselves from nature), and our mechanistic patterns of thinking have resulted in education systems that perpetuate this worldview. At the same time, we're ignoring or negating holistic thinking, other ways of knowing and understanding the world and all things that aren't yet quantifiable, overtly empirical, easily repeatable or that fail to contribute to our growth economies.

As a result, our schools almost exclusively emphasize the quantifiable, cognitive and measurable, both in subject matter areas and in pedagogy. When student learners of all ages are

The Integral Child

enculturated in our schools, exclusively emphasizing the cognitive and measurable ways of knowing and understanding (i.e., most easily testable, most relevant to contributing positively to our growth-oriented economic systems), we fail in at least two important ways. First, we deprive students of the opportunity to practice these important “internal” skills and experience and develop their full capacities as humans, and second, we send a clear message that other ways of knowing aren’t important, aren’t learnable, or are hindrances because they aren’t easily measurable or don’t fall into the patterns of thinking promulgated by our “scientific approach”. In other words, we have an astonishing range of human capacities that is going unexplored and undeveloped.

When we contemplate an [integral child](#), we begin to realize that what we emphasize in schools makes up just a small portion of what makes us human. We might invoke the iceberg analogy and recognize that most of what we are lies beneath the surface. Perhaps if student learners were normalizing and developing their internal capacities, awarenesses and mindsets outside of school, it might compensate for the bias towards the cognitive and measurable inside of school; however, it’s not happening to any large degree in our non-school environments either, especially those dominated by social and other media. Just as importantly, the research is now clear that integrating internal and external forms of learning and knowing^[5] enriches and deepens the experience of both. Synergy occurs and both are strengthened beyond what might happen separately.

When we begin to see (behold) each other as enriched, full spectrum human beings, we open ourselves to certain awarenesses. We recognize that non-cognitive ways of knowing, understanding and experiencing the world have been part of our genetic lineage far longer than the cognitive. In our long evolutionary journey, we’ve primarily been non-cognitive beings. To discard that long lineage and place all our eggs in the cognitive basket ignores the importance of music, dance, art, poetry, our awareness of and connection with place, contextualizing, our sense of purpose, empathy, compassion, gratitude and generosity, to name just a small fraction of the ways in which non-cognitive knowing is integrated into our daily experience. Each of these are experienced internally first. We may then try to describe our experience in words (as we try to do with poetry, for example), but a cognitive description isn’t a requirement for the actual experience of, say, gratitude or love. We might even argue that all of our creative expressions are our attempts to communicate in words, sounds or symbols something ineffable and felt about our human experience. They’re not required, except as some form of human allurements to communicate our experiences with one another — to tell stories — in all of the various forms we’ve used throughout the ages. Likewise, when we contemplate heart qualities — nobility, compassion, dignity, empathy, kindness, gratitude, altruism, joy, equanimity, generosity, curiosity, wonder, awe, reverence, sense of belonging, insight — cognition isn’t required for the experience itself. Throughout our time as humans, as part of developing our unique cultures, we’ve created rituals, ceremonies, dances, languages, chants, songs and so forth in an attempt to relate to, process, express and celebrate our experiences — we might even imagine they are all *in service* to these primordial, inner, non-cognitive human experiences.

The Integral Child

When put into the context of ecosocial literacy and our precarious situation in the 21st century, we also recognize that the full depth of our human potentiality is being called forth, or summoned, by the problems now facing our global human community. We might say our primary task is to reawaken our heart's innate intelligences. When we look carefully and honestly, we recognize that the challenges confronting us are not technical or cognitive in nature. They're not the result of poorly developed math, science or engineering skills or techniques of language literacy. Rather, our challenges are relational in nature. Questioning the ways we relate to one another and to the non-human forms of our Earth community are reflections that invite us to deepen our self-awareness, grow our inner reflective capacity and reawaken the wisdom of our hearts. These inner qualities are gateways to unlocking the plethora of heart intelligences we desperately need right now. It doesn't mean we jettison the cognitive; rather we recognize and act on the knowledge that the inner and outer inform, deepen and enrich one another — they work in harmony and relationship with one another. Put another way, we begin to recognize that much of what is left unexplored in our modern education systems are exactly the things that we need to help us move into a different way of being human on the planet and contribute to the transformation of our global human presence.

We already have the technology to repair everything and recycle everything. We have the technology to restrain from creating something that cannot be repaired or recycled quickly and easily or that requires or creates chemicals of which we're not absolutely certain of the impact on our human and non-human neighbors. For example, we have the technology to do without plastic and we have the technology to replace plastic with something that doesn't just create a different set of problems. We've done without plastic before, we can do it again. Indeed, we've barely gone a single human lifetime since the development of the plastics industry. Yet just as with radioactive waste, we still don't know how to help the earth quickly and safely biodegrade them even as we continue to produce them. These examples, and many others like them, point to issues of our organized irresponsibility and dysfunctional relationships. Our hearts and minds need first to re-orient, starting with a long pause for reflection and honoring what makes us human and what actually contributes to human happiness and our collective well-being.

If we examine indigenous views, especially those groups who are especially attuned to nature and have developed peaceful ways of abiding with one another, we find the children are raised (enculturated) in a much more balanced way with respect to their innate capacities as human beings. In other words, a more balanced blend of inner and outer knowing. This is not a question of one way being better than another or of our way versus their way. This is a recognition and awareness of the consequences of a particular way of viewing the human being, especially in terms of the social systems we create and our impact on the surrounding environment — in other words, the impact on ecosocial literacy.

Yet continuing today, all across the world, the entire realm of internal (felt, non-cognitive) experience is only rarely brought into the education environment. The recent increase in awareness around Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and its positive contribution to

The Integral Child

improving school climate, student engagement and learning, is a step in the right direction. The same is true for environmental or outdoor education that occurs in natural settings. They all have the potential for activating many of the inner, non-cognitive aspects of our human nature. Yet even the most well-intentioned SEL practitioner can “teach” SEL while keeping everything comfortably in the realm of the cognitive and lose the opportunity to offer students alternative ways of knowing and understanding themselves and their world.

Overemphasis in our education and enculturation on a narrow range of characteristics and subject areas (such as cognitive, thinking-oriented knowledge and understanding) creates an imbalance in our human development.^[6] Non-cognitive ways of knowing and understanding the world are critical components of developing and deepening our ecosocial literacy. As we expand our awareness of the innate or inherent capacities of human beings beyond the understanding emphasized in our schools, we begin to appreciate the importance of contemplation and reflection and other internal ways of knowing and understanding the world. We appreciate that all learning is enhanced when integrated with contemplation, reflection and contextualization.

Human transformation calls on our amazing capacities for deep reflection, contemplation, curiosity, wonder, awe and cultivating self-awareness and an expanded sense of self. These can all be learned, enriched, developed and refined to extraordinary depths. For this, the abundant and well-developed practices and perspectives of contemplative education and the contemplative spiritual traditions are unsurpassed. Humans from all over the planet have long lineages of contemplation, reflection and developing our non-cognitive sensitivities and awarenesses.^[7] It’s now well researched that the cultivation of attention, focus, presence and self-awareness all serve to ground, personalize and balance all learning. As educators, we might also wonder, for example, “What effects do gratitude, empathy and connection have on the container of learning?”

Understanding the integral child helps us recognize the full capabilities or possibilities of every student learner we encounter, helping us see fundamental equality and cultivating reverence. From an integral point of view, each child has the potential for developing and achieving their highest future possibility which may be thoroughly unrelated to their cognitive ability to achieve grade level performance in the unnatural environments of modern school systems. To teach the integral child means to see and honor their highest calling and to help them discover and develop their full range of gifts to offer the world.

In the context of ecosocial literacy, we’re seeking to actively cultivate the inner human capabilities that will be critical for solving the issues facing humanity in the next few decades. These aren’t technical or cognitive nor are they measured by our conventional assessments of success.

“The plain fact is that the planet does not need more successful people. But it does desperately need more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers, and lovers of every kind. It needs people who live well in their places. It needs people of moral

The Integral Child

courage willing to join the fight to make the world habitable and humane. And these qualities have little to do with success as we have defined it. — David Orr from the essay, “*What is Education For?*” in *Ecological Literacy: Educating Our Children for a Sustainable World* (1991).

Even our “measures” of creativity are biased by our modern forms of economy. We need to cultivate the sort of creativity that’s untethered from our modern economic systems — making derivative products that are scalable, marketable and fundable and which fuel and perpetuate our unsustainable hyper consumer- and materialism. We need creativity that is integrated with reflection and a larger sense of our human relationships. We need a creative vision that is flexible, adaptable, aware of multiple points of view and employs our human imagination, especially imagining a just and sustainable and *sustaining* future that isn’t quite here yet, but that is wanting to be born.

Contemplating Our Relationship to the Integral Child

As educators, we can begin by examining our own mindset and perspective.

- ▶ What does “whole child” mean in the context of your situation?
- ▶ How might you address aspects of the *integral child* that you’re currently omitting from your teaching practice?
- ▶ When a student learner walks into your classroom, who do you see? Can you see (or imagine) the gifts they cannot yet see?
- ▶ Do you see their fledgling capacity to reflect, contemplate, intuit, imagine and contribute to a just and sustainable future that is wanting to be born?
- ▶ When your student learner is struggling, do you still see their highest future possibilities as an integral human, here to create beauty and contribute to the flourishing of all life?
- ▶ When a person enters your classroom, what do you want them to notice and feel?
- ▶ What are ways you might cultivate a child’s self-awareness?
- ▶ What might it look like if you approach your classroom and teaching from the point of view of the *integral child*?
- ▶ How might you make a daily ritual of honoring the integral nature of each child in your classroom?
- ▶ How might you discover the underlying assumptions and beliefs you hold about your student learners, their gifts and abilities, and your role as an educator?

Imagine how many student learners (even in higher education)...

- ▶ have never experienced the actual Milky Way slowly make its way through an absolutely dark, moonless night sky?
- ▶ have never listened deeply to various natural habitats at all hours of the day and night?
- ▶ have never (or rarely) listened deeply to their classmates?
- ▶ have never contemplated or imagined their place in the family of things?

The Integral Child

- ▶ have never been exposed to or contemplated the consequences of the time developmental nature of our 14 billion year old universe?
- ▶ have never been allowed to wander and explore nature unsupervised?

Notes

[1] *Behold* in this sense goes beyond mere looking and implies a reflective or contemplative gazing. By contemplative, we mean some sort of reflection, or bringing something inside (or into our awareness) and investigating it or “holding it up to the light”. There might be the combination of “active reflection”, implying the creation of a relationship with whatever is brought into our awareness. We can be changed by this relationship. We might also use the term *witnessing*, implying a sense of profound presence or an active or participative “seeing”. We might *behold* art, a child’s face, the horizon, or sky and sea after a storm.

[2] Each year, Red knot sandpipers (*Calidris canutus*) embark on an amazing voyage from the Arctic to Patagonia, up to 15,000 km, guided by their own internal GPS (developed long before our human satellites).

[3] Galaxies are the fundamental unit of our 14 billion year old universe. Astronomers now estimate the number of galaxies to be in the neighborhood of 2 trillion, each with billions of stars and each, in all likelihood, with even more planets. The cognitive, scientific facts are one thing; reflection and the integration of those facts into our awareness and worldview is yet another altogether.

[4] Bristlecone Pine trees, especially *Pinus longaeva*, are among the oldest living life forms on Earth, with some close to 5,000 years old. Some of these trees started their journey on Earth as the pyramids were built and well before the emergence of the classical civilizations of India, China and Greece. Many were already ancient by the time Columbus stumbled upon the Americas.

[5] A note on nomenclature: *non-cognitive knowing and understanding* is a broad term and encompasses a vast array of potentials, from self-awareness, self-reflection and intuition, to the heart qualities such as gratitude, empathy, compassion and love, all the way to interspecies communication, sound and energy healing and the journeys of shamans and healers to various psychic realms. The terms most often used to describe alternatives to cognitive knowing might be non-cognitive, internal, reflective, contemplative.

[6] *“In the modern curriculum we have fragmented the world into bits and pieces called disciplines and subdisciplines. As a result, after 12 or 16 or 20 years of education, most students graduate without any broad integrated sense of the unity of things. The consequences for their personhood and for the planet are large. For example, we routinely produce economists who lack the most rudimentary knowledge of ecology. This explains why our national accounting systems do not subtract the costs of biotic impoverishment, soil erosion, poisons in the air or water, and resource depletion from gross national product. We add the price of the sale of a bushel of wheat to GNP while forgetting to subtract the three bushels of topsoil lost in its production. As a result of incomplete education, we’ve fooled ourselves into thinking that we are much richer than we are.”* - David Orr, from *Ecological Literacy: Educating Our Children for a Sustainable World* (The Bioneers Series). Publisher: Sierra Club Books; (October 1, 2005) ISBN 1-57805-153-3.

[7] Indigenous traditions almost uniformly have the worldview and common practice of communicating with plants, including the recognition that plants, being older than humans, are our teachers. Of course, from our separate, rational, mechanistic point of view, we believe this is complete nonsense and quickly attribute their detailed understanding of the flora and fauna of their environment and the medicinal and healing properties of plants as “trial and error” or “coincidence”; however, it’s only nonsense because it doesn’t fit into our world view — our way of viewing the world and our particular ways of knowing and understanding the world.