

FROM INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY TO THE PUBLIC GOOD:
A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF PERSONAL EDUCATIONAL BELIEFS
AND THE AIMS OF EDUCATION

by

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Abstract

This paper explores the development of my educational beliefs over a period of ten years. From consideration of differing notions of character education, to implicit assumptions about private and public education, to neoliberal educational and social policies, to social justice and democratic models of education, to Aboriginal conceptions of holism, this critical self-examination revealed the initial disparity between my moral impulse for entering the teaching profession, the aims of education as I understood them, and the means I had ascribed to achieve those aims. The paper concludes with the suggestion that an ideal educational model is holistic in nature, justice-oriented in its approach, contributes to the public good, and has democratic citizenship as the primary aim for all of its students.

Introduction

For the past three years I have been enrolled in the Masters of Education program in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver. When I entered the program in September of 2008, I was confident in my understanding of the aims of education and of what constituted effective educational practices. In a sense, I almost felt that this degree would serve to confirm or legitimize my existing beliefs. I could not have been more wrong. What followed was an extensive critical self-examination of my most cherished educational attitudes and understandings. From my narrow understanding of character education, to my implicit assumptions about the inherent superiority of private education, to the neoliberal¹ underpinnings of my educational philosophy, my program in educational administration and leadership has helped me to identify, examine and root out the educational beliefs that I subconsciously held that did not align with my understanding of the democratic aims of education. This paper is a chronicle of that transformation.

Becoming a Teacher

Eleven years ago, fresh out of university and uncertain about my future, I travelled to India and Nepal for the better part of six months. Fascinated with India's rich cultural and spiritual heritage, I was searching for answers to life's "big questions" (Astin & Astin, 2010) and was looking to find purpose in a life that seemed riddled with too many choices (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). During my first month in India I was fortunate to attend an international conference on values education. Until that moment, I had never considered education as a possible field of employment but found this opportunity serendipitous and felt a keen desire to attend. I participated wholeheartedly in the proceedings and emerged at the end of the week with

¹ Neoliberalism is a term used to describe a market-oriented approach to social and economic policy. It is discussed further on page 17 in the section, "Neoliberalism and Education".

a newly acquired appreciation for the dignity of the teaching profession. I honestly could not think of a more meaningful career. I had found my purpose: I wanted to become a teacher!

Not only did I want to pursue my own style of teaching, I also wanted to be an agent for positive social change through education. My background in transpersonal psychology and environmental philosophy merged with my educational aspirations and kindled a dedicated pursuit of alternative forms of education: social and emotional learning, environmental education, mindfulness programs in education, and media production/education. Similar to the reasons for my trip to India, I wanted something different from education and a justice-oriented purpose to my teaching practice. I wanted something holistic and inclusive – even if at that time I did not know what shape that might take.

After completing my B.Ed. in 2003, I sought to teach at an alternative school whose mission was to develop *responsible citizens* and that supplemented the provincial curriculum with, a) a socially just set of schooling practices, b) a mindfulness program, and c) integrated yoga classes. My introduction to the profession through values education, my solid background in character education from my teacher education program, and my personal interest in Indian culture led me to a small character education school in Ontario. The founder of the school was from India, and the adapted curriculum included daily practice of a “meditation on the light” and weekly yoga classes.

Through my study of the background of the school and my interactions with the principal, I became thoroughly convinced of the efficacy of character education and of the nobility of the teaching profession. I developed the strong sense that the role that teachers play in the lives of children is the most meaningful and significant professional relationship that exists, and that character education is the vehicle through which teachers can make the world a better place. Students of good character were the only solution to the ills of society, and my new career

would be to help children to develop and maintain a morally sound foundation from which to start their life's journey. I was completely sold: education for responsible citizenship, with a character education focus, was the definitive aim of education.

The Seeds of a More Critical Approach

Despite my initially resolute approach to education, over my five years at the school, my thoughts on education continued to grow and develop. During my latter years at the school, I often found myself questioning my understanding of character education and how I had defined responsible citizenship. Although I felt my current school was doing a great job of supplementing the provincial curriculum with important educational enhancements (e.g. service learning, environmental education, a mindfulness program, and an explicit engagement with specific values such as honesty and non-violence), I eventually found that its institutional environment (Bidwell, 2001) and hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968) often excluded many of the people it purportedly attempted to include. As my understanding of Canadian citizenship, based on the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982), involves the attempted elimination (or reduction) of exclusion or discrimination, this incongruence between the means (i.e., the school's character education program and enacted mission) and the end (i.e., responsible citizens) at the school formed fertile ground for the beginnings of my critical inquiry.

This initial reflection spawned a series of important questions about education. Was character education really the ideal means to achieve responsible citizenship? For that matter, was responsible citizenship really the end of education that I was personally aiming for? Would another phrase or expression better encapsulate what I understood to be citizenship? As I began to think about these questions more critically, my thoughts turned toward what an *ideal* school and educational model would look like. For example, how would the school be administered? What practices would a principal or teacher follow to be an effective educational leader? What

would the curriculum be? What educational principles would it include and, conversely, what would it exclude? And, perhaps most importantly, what would be its goals and how would it strive to achieve them? In other words, what would be the school's aim and what educational process would it implement to achieve it? These questions became the seeds of a more critical approach to education that I carried with me as I began my graduate studies.

Sketch of an Ideal School

As I entered a Master's program in education at the University of British Columbia, I felt that I *already* had the answers to these questions. My teaching-related experiences had provided me with what I felt was a comprehensive understanding of how to initiate, operate and administer a successful private elementary school. Not only had I taught grades four and six as a full-time teacher, but I also had the opportunity to teach core and alternative subjects in all of the school's classes (from kindergarten to grade six), provide administrative and technology support for the entire school, and take a prominent leadership role in developing school policies and charting the course of the school's ongoing identity formation. From teaching yoga and meditation to the entire school, to forming a school alumni network to offer support to school graduates, to researching, purchasing and installing a state-of-the-art computer lab, to providing individual and group after-school support for at-risk students, to helping design the school's website, brochures, parent handbook, and various promotional material, to editing, formatting and e-mailing the school's weekly newsletter, to helping develop start-of-year and end-of-year procedures, to instituting and organizing a school-wide public speaking contest, chess club and recycling program, to organizing the school's annual science fair and family sports day, I felt that I had gained enough experience to create an ideal school in my home province of British Columbia. I had seen the tremendous opportunities that were presented by private education in Canada as well as the potential pitfalls and limitations. I was ready to take the next step in my

professional career and move into school administration with the ultimate goal of creating and running my own school.

At that time, the next step for me was to first meet the requirements and documented qualifications for being a principal or vice-principal in British Columbia: BCCT certification, five years of teaching experience, proven leadership experience and a Master's degree from a recognized university. As I had effectively taken care of the first three, the next logical step for me was to complete an appropriate graduate degree. Following that, I could cement my vision of an ideal school and secure funding for an independent school in Metro Vancouver (my preferred location). As I had always wanted to pursue graduate studies, I initially thought this process would occur in that order but, interestingly, it was the reverse. Even before moving back to the West Coast, I was approached by a colleague from British Columbia with the offer to secure funding for an independent school with me at the helm as principal. He told me to finish my Masters and concretize my vision, and that when I was done we would revisit the plan. I was told pointedly "not to worry about money" and that if the vision was sound, the rest would take care of itself.

As this conversation was many months before the start of my program, and my acceptance to UBC's Educational Administration and Leadership program was already confirmed, I had plenty of time to flesh out my conceptualization of an ideal school. It was also many months before the end of the school year so I began to reflect on my teaching practice and the pros and cons of a school like the one I was working at. The result of this reflection was a checklist of sorts, as I had identified what I thought were the key characteristics of what would be a successful independent school in the province of British Columbia:

1. Adequate funding and land/space (including district-level pay for teachers, administrators and support staff, and industry-standard teaching facilities, materials and technology);

2. Open, collaborative and transformative leadership underpinning both the creation of the school and in its day-to-day operation;
3. A shared vision of education (and commitment to the school's mission) amongst all staff members, trustees and relevant stakeholders;
4. A program that meets the learning outcomes of the British Columbia curriculum;
5. An expanded curriculum that included character/values education, social and emotional learning, some aspect of spirituality, community and environmental service, Canadian Aboriginal history and literature, and media production and education;
6. A personalized family-centred education based on a low student-teacher ratio and individualized, personalized instruction;
7. An education and teaching methodology that honoured and embraced multiple intelligences² and a holistic conception of the individual (see Figure 1).

² My understanding of multiple intelligences was informed by Howard Gardner's *Frames of Mind* (1983) and *Intelligence Reframed* (1999) where he lists eight intelligences: verbal/linguistic, logical/mathematical, visual/spatial, bodily/kinaesthetic, musical/rhythmic, naturalist, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Gardner initially proposed seven intelligences in *Frames of Mind* and introduced naturalist intelligence as an eighth intelligence in *Intelligence Reframed* (p. 49).

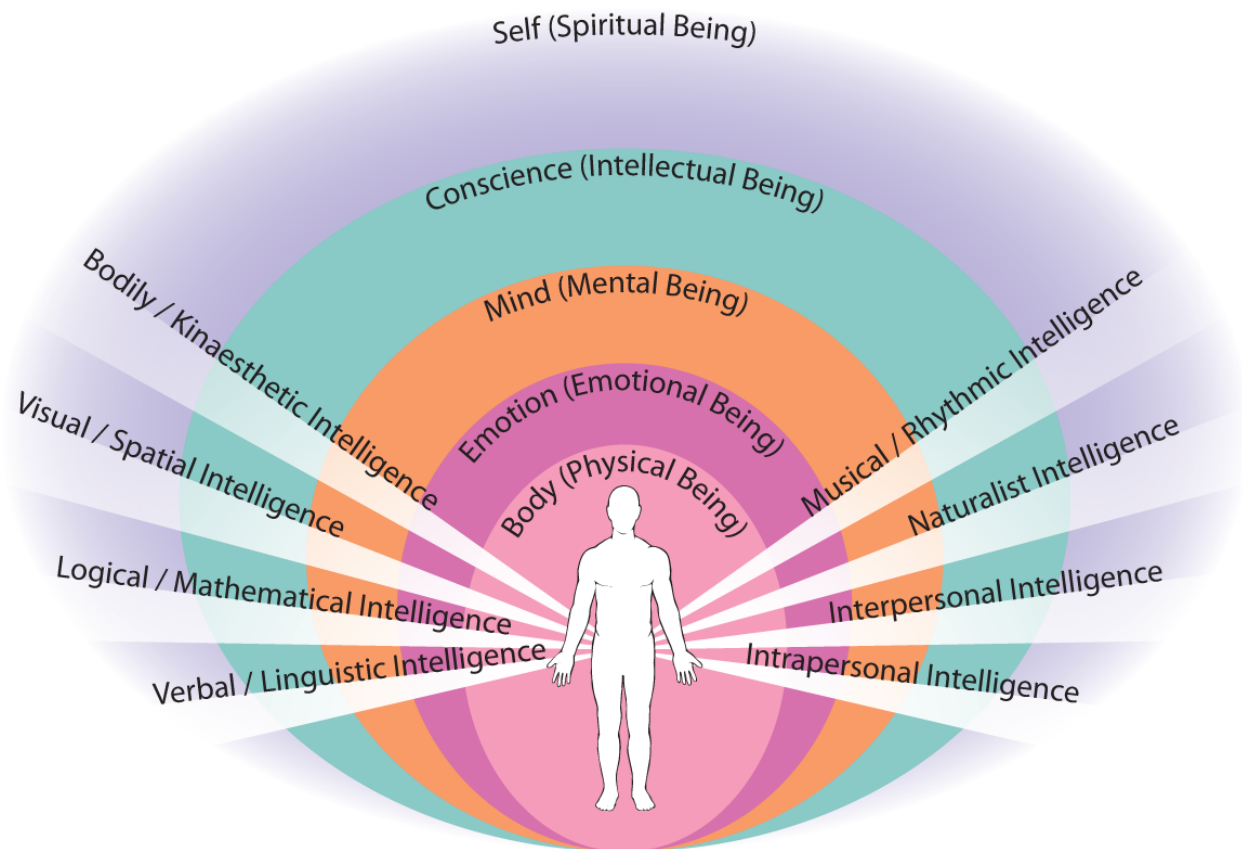


Figure 1. Holistic conception of an individual.

Although the financing of the school was supposed to be set aside for the time being, money-matters were still a primary concern for me and essentially dominated my initial planning of the school. Funding had to be sufficient in order to offer equitable pay to all employees and to provide high-quality instruction and programming. Seeing first-hand the difficulties that a school can face when underfunded, my vision of an ideal school hinged precariously on sufficient financing. Therefore, moving forward with my vision, the number one priority was consistently money: having enough to begin with, so that land could be purchased and the school could be built, and having enough to run the school after it was inaugurated.

Despite the financial hardships that such an ambitious project would entail, I still wanted to keep tuition fees at a reasonable rate so that families from a variety of backgrounds could

attend the school. Wanting to offer a viable alternative to families from all income brackets, I devised a plan for income-based tuition: tuition fees for students would vary according to family income. Although this would place greater stress on the school's coffers (and require a greater amount of funding to get the school up and running), this would allow for greater flexibility in the admittance of students and would hopefully allow for a more diverse student body.

Private Schools in Canada

As I completed my teaching in Ontario, where there are two publicly funded school systems (secular public schools and Roman Catholic schools) and private schools receive no direct public subsidy, I was enthusiastic to return to British Columbia where there has been partial funding of independent schools since 1977 (BC Ministry of Education, 2011). In fact, it is one of only five provinces that publicly fund private education (the others being Alberta, Manitoba and Québec, with Saskatchewan providing limited support) and trails only Alberta in the Fraser Institute's *Canadian Education Freedom Index* rankings for provision of educational choices within a province (Hepburn & Van Belle, 2003).

According to the British Columbia Independent Schools Act, independent schools can receive up to "50 percent of their local boards of education per student operating grant on a per FTE student basis" (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2011). Honestly, coming from Ontario, I felt this was a more equitable and socially just means of financing education in a Canadian province or territory. Either fund none or fund all; anything else is discrimination (or easily leads to it). This key governmental support enables any independent school (whether faith-based, philosophically or educationally unique, or with a specific focus or program) to receive a solid financial foundation from which to successfully operate their school. At the time, I felt that this was clearly a more efficient system than Ontario's in that it allowed for a greater diversity of educational organizations servicing students. This in turn would provide greater choices for

families in terms of schools and educational programs, and would therefore empower parents in their constitutional right to decide on the kind of education they want for their children.

Furthermore, in a competitive market environment, I felt that my model of education, premised on low, subsidized and income-scaled tuition, would be extremely competitive and a viable option for many British Columbian families.

Months later, as I began my graduate program at UBC, I carried these thoughts and ideas about education with me; as well as my model of an ideal independent school. Little did I know how difficult it would be to change these ideas.

A Personal Paradigm Shift

Tuesday, September 2, 2008 – a day of firsts: my first day as a UBC student, my first day in my Master’s degree program, and my first class in the Educational Administration and Leadership program. A multitude of questions floated through my mind: What would graduate school really be like? Would I get along with my fellow classmates? Would I enjoy my courses? Would my views align with those of my professors? What would I learn about in my courses? In the busy twelve months that followed, all of my questions were undoubtedly answered. Graduate school was everything that I hoped it would be (and more), my classmates were absolutely wonderful, I loved my courses and the conscientious and scholarly perspectives of my instructors, and my learning *truly* went beyond what I had initially envisioned. What a perfect start to my program!

My first year of courses provided me with an open forum to discuss relevant contemporary discourses on educational leadership and the aims of education. From critiques of neo-liberal and neo-conservative educational agendas (Apple, 2001), to the dangers of marketing in schools (Molnar & Reaves, 2002) and high-stakes accountability testing (Watanabe, 2007), to the need for democratic patriotism (Westheimer, 2006), to the process of *Othering* and the need for anti-racist education (Schick & St. Denis, 2005), to an understanding of different forms of capital and symbolic violence (Herr & Anderson, 2003), to an awareness of cultural and social reproduction (Pajak & Green, 2003), to the need for a “conceptual gestalt switch” from an individual/interpersonal perspective to a political perspective (Boyd & Arnold, 2000), to an expanded understanding of social justice (Gale, 2000), to the need for participatory and justice-oriented citizenship models of education (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), to the moral dimensions of teacher’s work (Ball & Wilson, 1996), I studied a variety of opinions and perspectives on the aims of education – all of which elicited a critical examination of my own beliefs and teaching

practices.

That critical examination began with a reflection on my own assumptions about the role that character education plays in education. Was character education really the be-all and end-all of education, as I had initially assumed when I first entered the teaching profession? Or was there something that I was missing? Despite what I felt was character education in practice, was what I was doing in the classroom *only* character education or *even* character education *at all*? Was character education really the best way to describe a teaching practice that seemed to embody much more? What theoretical model would better encapsulate my own understanding of the aims of education – one that had organically developed over my five years of teaching in Ontario (and that continues grow and evolve today)?

In a paper entitled *How Not to Teach Values*, Alfie Kohn (1997) criticizes most character education programs, pointing out that they often emphasize conformity and are “narrow” in focus. Instead, according to Kohn, if we wish to implement effective character education programs, they need to be “broad” in nature, helping students to become active participants in a democratic society, advocates for social justice, and autonomous, critical thinkers. Furthermore, such programs need to be based on a different set of core features, such as a positive view of human nature, a constructivist vision of learning and a balance of cognitive and affective concerns.

To a large extent, my educational practice had evolved over five years of teaching from a “narrow” conception of character education toward a “broad” practice. Although I had initially labelled my teaching practice as character education and it had (what I thought was) responsible citizenship as its goal, it was a label and goal that never quite encapsulated the range of practices I engaged my students with in the classroom. I believed in the inherent worth of *every* child and went out of my way to work personally with each of my students: adapting the curriculum to

their needs and proclivities, and encouraging independent critical thought. It was a broad practice that I had narrowly labelled.

In retrospect, I was not aiming at responsible citizenship through my teaching, but rather a participatory or justice-oriented citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) through a much more democratic model of education (than what character education is traditionally and generally associated with). Although I was perhaps not ready for an advocacy role at that time (in terms of empowering my students to effect social justice in their own lives and communities), I had created a fertile ground in my classroom for individual expression, participation and collaboration. I had gravitated towards a democratic model of education, one that resonated with my own perspective and understanding of what it means to be a Canadian citizen.

Questioning Deeper Biases

This revised understanding of my teaching practice wasn't unsettling, though; it was a natural progression that stemmed from a critical reflection on my practice. But as I began to dig deeper, a different picture started to emerge – one that was truly concerning: my deep-seated private school bias and my neoliberal ideas about education.

Raised in Victoria, British Columbia in a middle-class family, my experience of education was entirely limited to the private sector.³ I was enrolled in a private Montessori preschool program until grade one, and then spent twelve years at one of Victoria's largest and oldest private schools. My father, coming from a traditional British background, spent most of his pre-university school life in boarding schools based on the British model of education (on Vancouver Island and in England). In fact, his father served on the boards of two notable Vancouver Island private schools, and his maternal grandfather was a respected headmaster of a

³ Interestingly, Victoria was the site of British Columbia's first private schools and has an extensive history of private education (Cunningham & Cunningham, 2002).

number of prominent British private schools (Malim, 1948). Needless to say, he came from a rich background of private education. My mother, after spending time in both public and private schools, was adamant that my brother and I would never attend public school and that the only way we could obtain a good education was at a private institution. In my parents' case, a good education consisted of a safe learning environment, proper discipline, and an emphasis on academic excellence. Being a middle-class family with only one bread winner (with the exception of a few years when I was quite young), my parents had to forego any of the 'extras' that came with their middle class position, using whatever savings they had to pay for their children's tuition costs. Although we were unaware of what this entailed as we grew up, it was obvious to me later in life that my parents had made a tremendous financial sacrifice to provide my brother and I with what they felt was a quality education.

My parents' beliefs had a profound effect on me. Not only did I assume the inherent superiority of private education but I also took it for granted that as a teacher I would *always* work in a private school. As I understood my choices at the time I became a teacher, public schools had too much baggage and lacked the freedom that private schools enjoyed. Thus, teaching in a public school was not only undesirable for me; it was not even an option. After completing my B.Ed. in 2003, I went straight into teaching at a small private school in Ontario. I did so for five years, making personal sacrifices for the good of the mission of the school (non-graduated pay, lack of job security, no health plan for 3.5 years, etc.), but in return I enjoyed tremendous professional freedom and autonomy. In many ways, I reproduced in my professional life the beliefs that my parents had instilled in me while growing up: private education is vastly superior to public education and that alone justifies making sacrifices. Overall, I had cumulatively spent eighteen years of my life in a private school (as a student or as a teacher) and had developed an uncritical acceptance of the value of private education.

In their influential paper, *Politics, Markets, and the Organization of Schools*, John Chubb and Terry Moe (1988) discuss the numerous merits of private schools, and the benefits of decentralization (of power, resources and choice) in public education. They advocate a move towards a voucher system in public education; a move they say would “transform the public schools into different, more effective organizations, while still leaving them truly public” (p. 1085). Their argument rests on a point-by-point comparison of the features of public and private schools. It begins rather benignly:

In terms of general goals, public schools place significantly greater emphasis on basic literacy, citizenship, good work habits, and specific occupational skills, while private schools – regardless of type – are more oriented by academic excellence, and personal growth. ... In general, private schools tend to possess a clarity and homogeneity of educational purpose that does set them apart from public schools, at least on average. They place more emphasis on academic excellence, have stricter graduation requirements, and have tougher homework policies. And their staff members have clearer, more consistent conceptions of what their organizations are supposed to be achieving. (p. 1080-1081)

However, their argument eventually draws more cutting conclusions: teachers in private schools are willing to sacrifice or trade off higher salaries and job security for “superior working conditions, professional autonomy, and personal fulfillment” (p. 1083-1084), whereas public school teachers do exactly the opposite.

Perhaps what is most telling though is their early reference of theirs to students as *consumers* and to the fundamental constraints of the market (implying that this constraint motivates private schools to offer higher quality programs than public schools):

Private schools determine their own goals, standards, and methods. These may reflect the

values of owners or patrons, or perhaps a collective such as a diocese. But the market imposes a fundamental constraint. Private schools provide services in exchange for payment, and unless heavily subsidized from the outside, they must please their consumers – students and parents – if they are to prosper. (p. 1067)

When I first read this paper in 2008, I was blown away at how accurately it described the reasons I had chosen to work in a private school. However, as I re-read the paper multiple times over the following months, each time taking a more critical stance in my analysis, I found a number of crucial assumptions made by the authors that led me to question their perspective (and my own). Are public school teachers really not interested in “working conditions, professional autonomy, and personal fulfillment” as has been implied by the results of their study? Are the fundamental constraints of the market really the best motivation for institutions developed for the *public good*? Is viewing students and parents as “consumers” really an accurate description of their position or even ethically appropriate? If students are really just consumers, then is education only a commodity (or service), a school a business, and a teacher a salesperson, distributor or, to put it crudely, a dealer? It was at this point that I truly began to question my entrenched beliefs about private schools, as well as the increasing privatization and marketization of schools. These were issues of the politics of education: ones that I had previously ignored or had been unaware of, but could no longer afford to if I wanted my teaching practice to align with my educational beliefs.

Neoliberalism and Education

The voucher system advocated by Chubb and Moe, and their argument against public education, is representative of a larger market-driven approach to economic and social policy: *neoliberalism*. Neoliberalism, or free-from-controls liberalism (free enterprise, free competition, etc.), is described as “a political ideology grounded in an unshakeable belief in unbridled markets

as the source of all benefits for a society and its citizens” (Poole, 2007). As an approach to policy, it advocates for free and open markets, consumer choice, private enterprise and government deregulation. Furthermore, neoliberals strongly believe that “the application of market principles to the public sector will result in greater efficiency and contribute to overall economic prosperity” (Poole, 2007). In other words, education – along with other public services and social programs – is interpreted solely within an economic rationality. Neoliberalism reduces the inherent value of education to market principles, and places it squarely within a supply and demand arena of competition.

Martinez and García (2000) (see also, Ross & Gibson, 2007, and Ross, 2010) state that there are four main characteristics of neoliberalism: 1) the rule of the market (including “cutting public expenditure for social services” and “reducing the safety-net for the poor”); 2) deregulation (of “everything that could diminish profits”); 3) privatization (of “state-owned enterprises, goods and services”); and, 4) elimination of the concept of the public good (or community) and replacing it with “individual responsibility”. To put it simply, according to neoliberalism, a weak state is better than a strong one, and what is private is good and what is public is bad (because private enterprise is better able to support the public good than public institutions). Economic rationality is the hallmark of intelligent thought and should be the only form of logic used to guide collective decision making, and people should act in their own self-interest – because people focused on meeting their own needs will lead to a stronger public good (Kezar, 2004).

When Chubb and Moe were speaking about the merits of private schools and advocating for a voucher system in public education, they were effectively arguing for the efficiency of private enterprise and for an increased role of the private sector in determining public educational policies. The privatization of public services, along with viewing students as

consumers, places education within an open market conceptual framework, where schools will compete with each other for students, resources and finances. Poole (2007):

Neo-liberals conceptualize education as a commodity to be bought by customers (students and parents) and sold by suppliers (schools and others). From a market perspective, schools are training grounds for future workers and consumers, as well a [sic] multi-billion dollar industry offering opportunities for profit. Efficiency, accountability for student outcomes (usually measured by standardized test scores and other measures like graduation rates), choice for parents (e.g., charter schools, vouchers, within-district school choice), privatization (e.g., public funding for private schools, user-pay fees, contracting with private firms to operate public schools, private-public partnerships for school construction, school-business partnerships), and attacks on teachers unions are hallmarks of neo-liberalism in education.

Neoliberal ideas about education and the marketization of schools make education an arena of competition instead of one of service, support and facilitation. The neoliberal push towards individual responsibility, self-interest and the enterprising individual are essentially an erosion of the public good.

Compromising the Public Good

In a fascinating case study on school leadership and emotional management, Jill Blackmore (2004) discussed the frustration that many principals and teachers experienced when they had to implement various neoliberal reforms and performativity measures. The educators all felt that their ability to contribute to the public good was compromised by the introduction of these regulations. When asked about what guided their practice as educators and what informed their desire to work for the public good, their responses reflected a somewhat unified collective sense of education for the public good: education as a means of socially progressive change, a

desire to promote a moral good, a responsibility to *all* children, caring for others within wider citizenship responsibilities, making a difference for all students based on principles of equity, and a professional commitment to the public. All of these reasons informed their choices to be educators in the public sector – reasons which similarly informed my commitment to the teaching profession.

Even if we were willing to accept that free and open markets might benefit schools and children, the evidence unfortunately does not support it. Neoliberal policies do not serve *all* children equally; they do not contribute to the public good: they effectively privilege those with more economic, social and cultural capital.⁴ According to Ross (2010), neoliberalism benefits the upper and corporate classes at the expense of the general public:

Embraced by parties across the political spectrum neoliberalism is characterized by social and economic policies shaped in the interests of wealthy investors and large corporations.

The free market, private enterprise, consumer choice, entrepreneurial initiative, and government deregulation are fundamental principles driving the attack on public education across North America. (p. 208)

Apple (2001) agrees, stating that neoliberal educational policies and the marketization of schools “systematically privilege” wealthy families:

...the further one’s practices follow the logics of action embodied in marketising principles, the worse the situation tends to get. Markets systematically privilege higher

⁴ Yosso (2005), paraphrasing Bourdieu, outlines three forms of capital: 1) cultural capital (i.e., education, language), 2) social capital (i.e., social networks, connections), and 3) economic capital (i.e., money and other material possessions) (p. 76). Reay (2004), also drawing upon Bourdieu, further expands the concept of cultural capital to include three variants: “first, in the embodied state incorporated in mind and body. The accumulation of cultural capital in its embodied form begins in early childhood. It requires pedagogical action, the investment of time by parents, other family members or hired professionals to sensitize the child to cultural distinctions. Second, cultural capital exists in the institutionalized state, that is existing in institutionalized forms such as educational qualifications, and third, in the objectified state, simply existing as cultural goods such as books, artefacts, dictionaries and paintings” (p. 74-75).

socio-economic status families through their knowledge and material resources. These are the families who are most likely to exercise choice. Rather than giving large numbers of students who are working class, poor, or of colour the ability to exit, it is largely higher socio-economic status families who exit from public schools and schools with mixed populations. In a situation of increased competition, this in turn produces a spiral of decline in which schools populated by poorer students and students of colour are again systematically disadvantaged and schools with higher socio-economic status and higher White populations are able to insulate themselves from the effects of market competition. ‘White flight’ then enhances the relative status of those schools already advantaged by larger economic forces; schooling for the ‘other’ becomes even more polarised and continues a downward spiral. (p. 418)

In the context of education, neoliberal values and policies would create an outcome that is vastly different from the one I had envisioned as the aim of education: justice-oriented citizenship. My understanding of neoliberalism and its basic tenets therefore highlighted the inherent contradictions between the aims of education that I was trying to pursue and the means I had chosen to achieve it.

Unravelling My Educational Biases

Critically examining my early bias in favour of private schools and my prior educational beliefs, it became apparent to me that I was reproducing and espousing many of the tenets of neoliberalism in my professional practice and beliefs. I had considered public education to be less effective than that offered by the private sector and was proud to be living in a province that supported private education through public funding. I was caught up with the marketization of my proposed school, constantly thinking about how to make it more competitive in the British Columbia independent school market, and how to make it a more viable option for families from

a range of economic backgrounds. I was increasingly focused on the school's financial and resource management, as well as the school's image (i.e., how it would be portrayed to potential investors and students), rather than on educational programs, leadership and contribution to the public good. My proposed system of income-based tuition was in many ways similar to the voucher system recommended by Chubb and Moe (1988).

All of these criticisms are undoubtedly valid but they could actually be interpreted in a more favourable light in slightly different circumstances. For example, by wanting to include "some aspect of spirituality" in my school, I *had* to think *outside* of public education because the mandate of public schools in British Columbia is to "be conducted on strictly secular and nonsectarian principles" (School Act, § 76, 1996). Thus, the (reasonable) limits of public education *required* that I pursue alternative means for the implementation of my vision. However, there was one aspect of my proposed school – based on a foundational premise that I assumed about the nature of education – that was undeniably neoliberal: individual responsibility. Although my intentions were good, I had ignored public education and notions of the public good in favour of individual choice and responsibility. I had designed what I felt was an excellent educational program and locally-adapted curriculum, but had assumed that its benefits would be realized individually on the strengths and merits of each particular student. His or her parents would first have to make the necessary financial sacrifices and then the student would move through the school's programs according to his or her unique strengths.

In retrospect, I had focused on individual abilities and responsibilities because that was how I felt that I had arrived at my own present circumstances. Although I had received tremendous support from my parents, family and middle-class upbringing, I still felt that my achievements were a direct result of my own determination, courage and strength of mind. The school and educational program that I had designed were therefore more a reflection of my own

personal journey than of social justice or a collective public good (a result that I was striving to achieve in my teaching practice since I decided to become a teacher, but one that I had not been able to fully grasp). In actuality, I had not understood the political aspects of education, the array of forces that influence student success in schools, and had not fully inquired into the proper means of bringing about effective educational change. Essentially, I needed to broaden my understanding of the cultural and social influences on education. Given that those influences exist within a national political context, my first step was to better understand the constitutional framework of Canada: democracy.

Philosophical Foundations of Education

Democracy, Citizenship and Education

The term democracy comes from the Greek root words *demo* or *demos*, meaning “people”, and *crac* or *crat*, meaning “rule” or “ruler”. Democracy therefore means “rule of the people” or “rule by the people”. In its crudest form, the rule of the people is interpreted solely as the rule of the majority. When taken to an extreme, a democracy can actually be considered a selfish regime: the tyranny of the majority can lead to the unjust treatment of minorities.

However, within the Canadian context of representative and liberal democracy – the forms of government that are used to govern Canada – the rule of the majority is tempered with the fundamental principles of equality and liberty, and respect for the rights of all individuals (Malcolmson & Myers, 2005). Furthermore, in 1982 those freedoms and rights became constitutionally entrenched with the adoption of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982); freedoms such as freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief, opinion and expression, and rights such as the right to life, liberty, security of person and to equal treatment before and under the law.

The principles of democracy rest on much more than a specific political form of national administration or the governing power of a majority of people: they rest on a foundation of ethical beliefs centred on fundamental human rights and freedoms. At its root, democracy is a moral conception of how we ought to live with other people. It is driven by an ethical vision of what is right and proper (Levin, 1998). The democratic perspective is essentially concerned with questions that each of us confront on a daily basis: questions about the moral suitability of a course of action or whether or not that action will make the world around us a better place. Levin (1998) argues that democracy is something more than a just way to make rules and to assemble and organize governments: “At its best it is a way of life” (p. 61). It is a way of life because it

provides a powerful and comprehensive lens through which people can confront and attempt to find solutions to many of life's 'big questions'.

Practices based on these democratic principles are built upon the entitlement of all people to an informed and respected participation in their own governing. It is the right of all people in a democracy to have their ideas and opinions heard and acknowledged, and to have their voice contribute in a meaningful way to the making of public decisions. The needs and wants of each individual are justly considered and weighted in a collective decision making process. Thereby, each person in a democracy has a fair and equitable influence on the choices made by the collective. Furthermore, in its ideal form, it is expected – or at least greatly encouraged – that all people are involved in public decision making: “The central idea here is that people should be closely and extensively involved in making decisions that affect them” (Levin, 1998, p. 58).

One of the most important tasks of a democracy therefore involves a great balancing act: diversity and individual beliefs need to be respected and included, but at the same time, harmony and a common sense of community need to be sought. Engaging in equitable public dialogue with others who do not share our particular opinion requires us to live in a state of mutual respect, tolerance and understanding. Thus, respect and tolerance for divergent views and skills such as positive discussion, understanding and reasoned debate are indispensable. Furthermore, because democracy actively “encourages new social actors to emerge and to act” (Gaskell, 2001, p. 34), the test of democratic practice in any environment rests (in many ways) on the treatment of the least powerful. Minorities and those whose voices are often not heard play a crucial role in determining the efficacy of a democratic political regime.

Democracy and Education in Canada

One of the most important policy issues currently facing the Canadian provincial and federal governments concerns primary and secondary (K-12) education. Education from

kindergarten to high school plays a vital role in the formation of democratic beliefs, ideals and citizenship. According to Dornbusch and Glasgow (1996), a “central goal of mass education is the development of a properly trained and socialized citizenry” (p. 403). Through the process of socialization, Canada’s children and youth grow to understand and appreciate the values that form the foundation of Canadian society: values such as freedom, fairness, honesty, respect, compassion, integrity, and justice (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1996). Education also prepares Canada’s citizens for meaningful and creative participation in the work force, civic life and the Canadian and world economies. Without this foundational guidance and instruction of the Canadian population, it could be argued that the rest of our government’s concerns are entirely meaningless.

In a democratic society, education should promote the principles of democracy if it is to truly serve the public good. How can we create a democratic education that builds upon the strengths of the existing educational structure? According to Levin (1998), a democratic education would have at least the following seven characteristics (p. 64-65):

1. “It would focus on moral principles and questions as being primary over technical ones.”
2. “Reason and knowledge would be paramount over rank and authority.”
3. “The school and everyone in it would be concerned with creating the conditions for dialogue about practices.”
4. “There would be respect and tolerance for divergent views.”
5. “Everyone in the organization would not only tolerate but work actively to create participation in the school by all.”
6. “The school would strive to build community and solidarity while also respecting diversity and divergence.”

7. “The school would recognize and encourage alternative sources of authority.”

In other words, there must be active participation by all members of the community and a commitment to shared values such as respect and tolerance. Furthermore, by focusing on moral principles, a democratic education and an education for democratic citizenship would actively engage the social and political aspects of life. Education is not just an individual affair: we learn through interaction with others and do so within cultural, social and political realities.⁵

Three Types of Democratic Citizens

In *What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy*, Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne (2004) discuss different conceptions of the democratic destination of education. Starting with the question, “What kind of citizen do we need to support an effective democratic society?” (p. 239), their research and analyses of various educational theories and programs led them to distinguish between three distinct kinds of citizenship: 1) the personally responsible citizen; 2) the participatory citizen; and 3) the justice-oriented citizen.

The personally responsible citizen aligns best with the desired outcome of traditional values or character education: honest, obedient, hard-working, responsible members of society who obey the law and pay their taxes. Westheimer and Kahne explain:

The personally responsible citizen acts responsibly in his or her community by, for example, picking up litter, giving blood, recycling, obeying laws, and staying out of debt.

The personally responsible citizen contributes to food or clothing drives when asked and volunteers to help those less fortunate, whether in a soup kitchen or a senior center.

Programs that seek to develop personally responsible citizens attempt to build character and personal responsibility by emphasizing honesty, integrity, self-discipline, and hard

⁵ See the Appendix for a description of how I use the terms cultural, social and political in this paper.

work. (p. 241)

Whereas the personally responsible citizen is an isolated individual practicing conservative values, the participatory citizen is an active member of community organizations, participating in civic life at various levels of society. According to Westheimer and Kahne:

[The participatory citizen] actively participate[s] in the civic affairs and the social life of the community at the local, state, or national level. ... Proponents of this vision emphasize preparing students to engage in collective, community-based efforts. ...

Whereas the personally responsible citizen would contribute cans of food for the homeless, the participatory citizen might organize the food drive. (p. 241-242)

The last category, the justice-oriented citizen, is the least common outcome of an education for democratic citizenship. Educational programs that seek to produce justice-oriented citizens extend their vision to encapsulate a wider focus, encouraging critical assessment and engagement with various social, political and economic structures. Justice-oriented citizens try to discern the underlying systemic causes of social injustice and attempt to change the very structures that produce them. In Westheimer and Kahne's own words:

Justice-oriented educators argue that effective democratic citizens need opportunities to analyze and understand the interplay of social, economic, and political forces. ...

[E]ducational programs that emphasize social change seek to prepare students to improve society by critically analyzing and addressing social issues and injustices. These programs are less likely to emphasize the need for charity and volunteerism as ends in themselves and more likely to teach about social movements and how to effect systemic change. ... [I]f participatory citizens are organizing the food drive and personally responsible citizens are donating food, justice-oriented citizens are asking why people are hungry and acting on what they discover. (p. 242)

The Three Realms

The framework articulated by Westheimer and Kahne can be summarized using three distinct value spheres: the individual, the interpersonal (or cultural, as I would refer to it) and the social. Each of these spheres has a realm of influence and applicability within educational contexts, and carries with it different implications for curriculum and its implementation. In this regard, Westheimer and Kahne argue that the interpersonal and social spheres carry the greatest weight in an education for democratic citizenship. They argue that the traits associated with personally responsible citizenship, although sometimes valuable, are not inherently democratic and may in fact actively work against those qualities associated with the other spheres (e.g. kindness, volunteerism and charity work can be construed as ways to avoid deeper and farther reaching policies and political engagements). However, the traits associated with the interpersonal and social spheres are absolutely essential in the preparation of citizens for democracy.

The use of Westheimer and Kahne's three spheres to understand the aims and benefits of education is echoed by Boyd and Arnold (2000) who propose three similar perspectives: 1) the personal well-being or individual perspective, 2) the social welfare or interpersonal perspective, and 3) the relationships among social groups or political perspective. However, their treatment of these three groups is perhaps more inclusive and optimistic:

[W]e suggest that it could be argued that any comprehensive and justifiable theory of the aims of education (at least in democracies that take commitments to diversity seriously) must not only be able to accommodate all three perspectives, but also make claims about how they are to be weighted relative to each other and how the inevitable tensions between them should be resolved, at least in broad principle. (p. 29)

I believe that the educational programs associated with each of these perspectives and

kinds of citizenship *all* contain some measure of validity and each has a time and place in the education of children for democratic citizenship. In order to provide a comprehensive and holistic democratic education, students will need exposure to each of these different approaches. Instead of discarding or downplaying programs that seek to develop the “personally responsible citizen” because they *can* be superficial and ideologically biased (which Westheimer and Kahne do, to some extent), those ideals and aspects of such educational programs that *are* democratic and that can be agreed upon should still form a significant part of education – e.g. “ideals [such] as freedom of speech, social justice, equality, and the importance of tolerating dissenting opinions” (Westheimer, 2006).

When viewed holistically, the three constructs of ideal citizens described by Westheimer and Kahne (2004) and the three different perspectives discussed by Boyd and Arnold (2000) are essentially indicative of three lenses through which we perceive and experience the world: the individual realm, the cultural realm (i.e. interpersonal and communal) and the social realm (i.e. structural and political). Theoretically, these three realms can be analyzed and discussed independently; however, as with all aspects of life, they are inherently interconnected and interwoven. Despite how the individual realm may be regarded on its own, it is always situated within multiple contexts – from the historical to the political; the cultural to the structural. As seen in Figure 2, these realms can be visually understood through the use of three overlapping spheres to indicate the simultaneous uniqueness of each realm and also the gestalt or holistic conception of their mutual interactions.

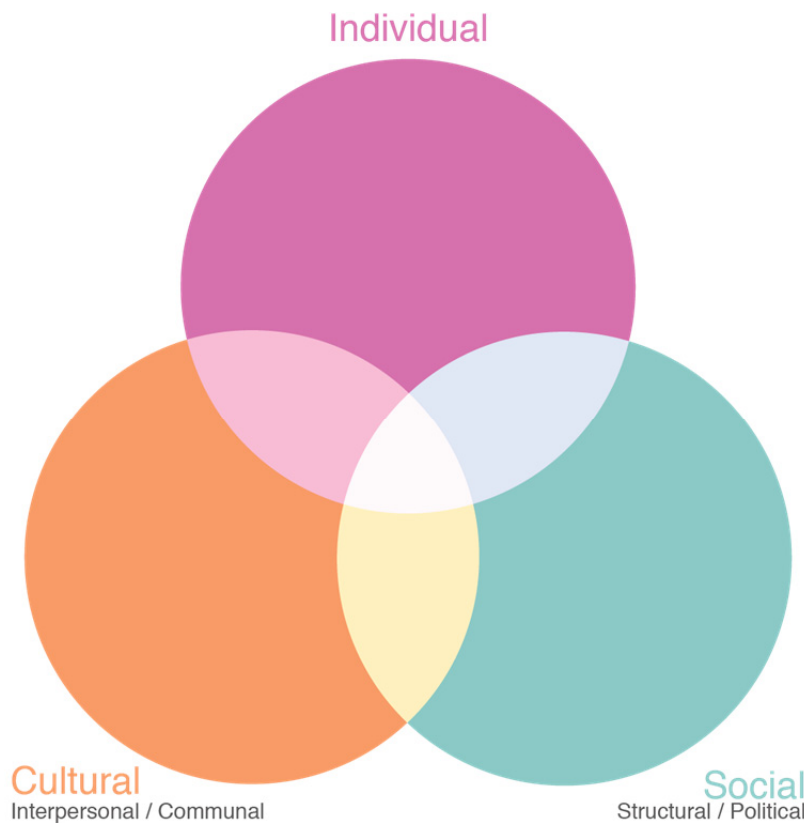


Figure 2. Three realms of human experience.

Collaborative and Inclusive Dialogue

Coulter and Wiens (1999) argue persuasively that in order for Canadians to build the kind of society they want – and an education that is consistent with that vision – they need to bring communities together to discuss what they consider valuable and good. People and communities need to engage in “incisive and inclusive dialogue”. This type of dialogue often starts with critical self-reflection, personal inquiry and the asking of deep questions. Biesta (2007) also says that educators need to create opportunities for dialogue, and that they need to challenge students to participate in such conversations “by confronting them with what and who is other and by

posing such fundamental questions as ‘What do you think about it?’, ‘Where do you stand?’, ‘How will you respond?’” (p. 11). This form of collaborative dialogue is at the heart of a democratic education. If there is to be social justice and support for the public good then there must first be interpersonal dialogue and collaboration.

An inclusive educational environment is not a goal – sufficient in and of itself – but rather a starting point or process from which to bring about the goal of democracy: the *public good*. Individuals need to be brought together to engage in critical reflection and dialogue that brings about positive social change. In other words, all three realms – the individual, cultural and social – all need to be engaged in a democratic education that is justice-oriented and aimed at the public good.

Integrating What I Have Learned into My Teaching Practice

Understanding the Public Good

Reflecting on my teaching years and vision of an ideal school, I realized that I had placed too much emphasis on the individual realm in my conception of education. Although to a limited extent I had engaged with cultural concerns, I had ignored the social and political aspects of education. Now, by placing education within communal and political contexts, I was better able to grasp the neoliberal influences on my educational beliefs. I was also able to better situate my teaching practice within a context of communal or public good, as opposed to the individual consumer good I previously favoured (albeit subconsciously). Social justice, equity, democracy, the common good, community building and the politics of education became the focus of my educational pursuits and teaching practice. I began to understand why contributing to the public good was so important (as opposed to just the good of individuals): improving the conditions of social life in order to enable *all* people to freely shape their lives through responsible and empowered action is the goal of democracy and is the goal of a justice-oriented democratic education. Furthermore, “all people” means not just a select group of people (e.g., those who can afford it) but rather all members of society, especially those who are disadvantaged or struggle with low income.

When thinking about my reasons for becoming a teacher, a sense of social justice and my commitment “to be an agent for positive social change through education” has always been at the heart of it. I wanted something holistic and inclusive from my professional practice; something that would make my community and Canadian society a better place for all. Although I did not have the tools, discourse or language to identify the means to achieve these goals at the time, the desire to find a *just* purpose attributable to my teaching practice was the moral impulse behind my involvement with education. Now, after three years in my graduate program, I feel that I

have a better understanding of the means and ends of education. An education that is *holistic* in nature, *justice-oriented* in its approach, contributes to the *public good*, and has *democratic citizenship* as the primary aim for all of its students is to my mind truly an ideal educational model.

Similar principles and attributes are echoed in section 3 of the Human Rights Code (1996) and in the preamble to the British Columbia School Act (1996). Among the purposes of the Code outlined in section 3, are the prevention of discrimination and the promotion of “a climate of understanding and mutual respect where all are equal in dignity and rights”. And the preamble clearly states that public schools are open to all members of society and that children from all cultures and backgrounds are to be respected and valued:

[I]t is the goal of a democratic society to ensure that all its members receive an education that enables them to become literate, personally fulfilled and publicly useful, thereby increasing the strength and contributions to the health and stability of that society; ...
[and] the purpose of the British Columbia school system is to enable all learners to become literate, to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic and pluralistic society and a prosperous and sustainable economy;

Working towards Social Justice

As I now seek to apply what I have learned in my graduate program at UBC to my own teaching practice, not only have I moved from an exclusive focus on private education to that of the public sphere, I have also gravitated towards an area of public education that I feel will have the most impact in my community and in Canadian democratic society: *social justice*. Social justice is commonly understood to be the protection of human rights but, according to the British Columbia Ministry of Education’s policy document, *Diversity in BC Schools: A Framework*, it

actually extends far beyond them, including principles such as full participation, equity, collaboration and shared prosperity:

Social justice advocates for the full participation of all people, as well as for their basic legal, civil and human rights. The aim of social justice is to achieve a just and equitable society. It is pursued by individuals and groups – through collaborative social action – so that all persons share in the prosperity of society.

This definition is echoed in the introduction to the British Columbia Social Justice 12 (2008) curriculum:

A progressive, democratic country values diversity and inclusion. It also fosters caring and fair communities. Social Justice [studies] ... promotes the pursuit of social justice as an important responsibility for all, and encourages students to develop the commitment and ability to work toward a more just society. ... [It] includes an emphasis on action, providing opportunities for students to examine models of social change and implement strategies to address social injustice. (p. 11)

Alfie Kohn (2008) describes social justice as “widening circles of care that extend beyond self” (p. 20); circles that develop and grow to embrace families, communities, the nation, and the world. Interestingly, expanding one’s sense of self, embracing community and attending to the whole child are all foundational aspects of an Indigenous approach to education: one that includes the physical, emotional, intellectual, social, ethical and spiritual aspects of being, and one that also acknowledges and incorporates the multitude of environmental, cultural and social influences on education. Jo-ann Archibald (2008) refers to this approach as *holism*:

An Indigenous philosophical concept of holism refers to the interrelatedness between the intellectual, spiritual (metaphysical values and beliefs and the Creator), emotional, and physical (body and behaviour/action) realms to form a whole healthy person. The

development of holism extends to and is mutually influenced by one's family, community, band, and nation. The image of a circle is used by many First Nations peoples to symbolize wholeness, completeness, and ultimately wellness. The never-ending circle also forms concentric circles to show both the synergistic influence of and our responsibility toward the generations of ancestors, the generations of today, and the generations yet to come. The animal/human kingdoms, the elements of nature/land, and the Spirit World are an integral part of the concentric circles. (p. 11)

This holistic conception of a “whole healthy person”, situated within mutually-influencing contexts, can be depicted through the use of concentric circles (see Figure 3).

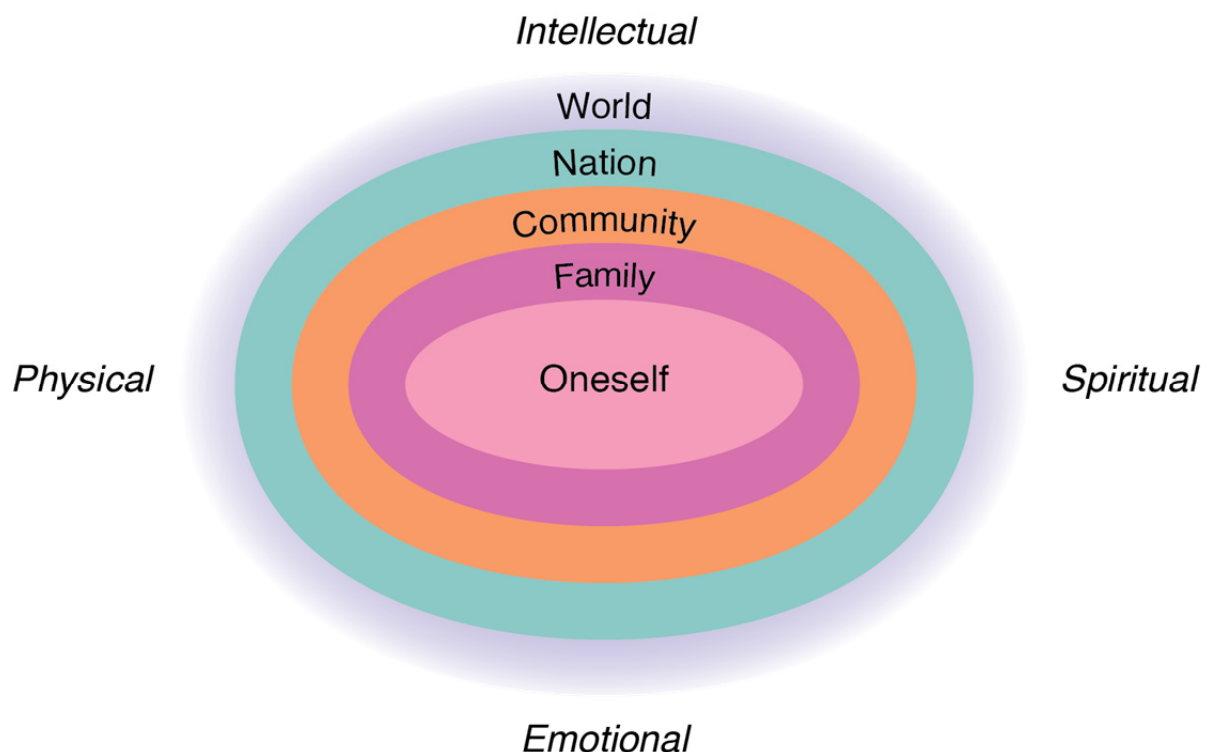


Figure 3. Holism: A context for social justice education (adapted from Archibald, 2008, p. 11)

Conclusion

After critically analyzing my educational beliefs, discarding those that were incompatible with my aims, and keeping or adapting those that were appropriate, I can now fully appreciate holism as a context for public education.⁶ It resonates with my understanding of a “whole healthy person” while still embracing the multiple contexts that continually inform educational policy and practice (cultural, interpersonal, communal, social, structural, political, etc.). With strong community connections, holism stands in stark contrast to neoliberal policies and the marketization of schools.

Over the last three years, I have come to the conclusion that social justice and the public good should direct educational policy in Canada; not the enterprising individual or the open market. I have also gained a deep appreciation for the politics of education, recognizing “what goes on outside of schools, in homes and neighborhoods and social and economic life, is as important to school achievement, if not more so, than what goes on inside” (Spencer, 2010). Overall, this period has allowed me to critically reflect on my own prejudices and preconceived notions about education and to thereby come to a fuller and richer understanding of the inherent worth and value of public education.

My time at UBC has been a valuable journey: as I look back I can appreciate that the Department of Educational Studies has made a significant contribution to my ongoing professional development. Not only have I learned a great deal about education and the multitude of influences that impact it, but I have also come to a deeper realization of how to manifest the moral principles that, since day one, have guided me in my work and aspirations as an educator.

In the introduction to the British Columbia Social Justice 12 (2008) curriculum, the

⁶ Although spirituality would not be an area covered in public schools, it is an area that can be reasonably accommodated.

attributes of a successful social justice program are described as follows:

A successful Social Justice [program] will provide opportunities for students to examine their own beliefs and values, as well as the origins of those beliefs. In addition, it will allow them to support or challenge their beliefs and values through reflection, discussion, and critical analysis. This [approach] builds on students' innate sense of justice, motivating them to think and act ethically, and empowering them to realize their capacity to effect positive change in the world. (p. 11)

Although this is a description of a successful high school course, I feel that it is more than appropriate to apply it to the graduate program in the Department of Educational Studies at UBC. Throughout my graduate program, I have critically examined my own beliefs and values, have been given the opportunity to express myself through discussion and papers, and have had my beliefs and values challenged by the conscientious and scholarly perspectives of the Department's faculty. I can say without hesitation that this period of democratic immersion has rejuvenated my "innate sense of justice" and has categorically empowered me to work for social justice and "to effect positive change in the world".

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Appendix

Cultural, Interpersonal and Communal Influences

Culture and cultural, as I use the terms in this paper, refer broadly to forms of social history and identity guided by a set of shared values, characteristics and understandings. This is a perspective of culture shared by many researchers in the field of organizational sociology. For example, Ouchi and Wilkins (1985) refer to culture as “the normative bases and the shared understandings that, through subtle and complex expression, regulate social life” (p. 458). And Yosso (2005) describes it likewise:

... culture refers to behaviors and values that are learned, shared, and exhibited by a group of people. Culture is also evidenced in material and nonmaterial productions of a people.

Culture as a set of characteristics is neither fixed nor static. (p. 75-76)

Values are an internal reality that are ‘exhibited’ or expressed through communal interaction and interpersonal communication with others. Shared values and their behavioural expression form the basis of culture. Cultural, interpersonal and communal realities are intimately connected with each other.

Social, Structural and Political Influences

Where culture is based on shared internal understandings, social and political realities are, to a much greater extent, external and institutionalized. Bidwell (2001) maintains that schools and education firmly exist within institutionalized environments that “encompass beliefs about the purposes of education, about the way in which education should be conducted, and about the organizational arrangements for its conduct” (p. 107). In the context of organizations, Zucker (1987) discusses the meaning of institutional:

What is the meaning of institutional? Two defining elements are shared by the theoretical approaches to institutionalization in organizations: (a) a rule-like, social fact quality of an

organized pattern of action (exterior), and (b) an embedding in formal structures, such as formal aspects of organizations that are not tied to particular actors or situations (nonpersonal/objective). (p. 444)

It is the embedding of rules or social ‘facts’ into formal structures that defines the social aspects of our world. Dornbusch and Glasgow (1996) describe it in a similar fashion:

The term social structure refers to a relatively enduring pattern of social arrangements or interrelations within a particular society, organization, or social group. Thus, social structure may take different forms depending on the level of social organization. ... At the societal level, social structure is expressed in institutional form, consisting of an integrated pattern of social ideology, norms, and roles. At the organizational level, social structure is embodied both by the external context within which an organization operates and by the internal coordinating mechanisms that give rise to the organization’s visible form. (p. 402)