

REFLECTIONS OF A COUNTERCULTURE BABY: IN PURSUIT OF HOLISM IN EDUCATION

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I was raised by hippies. While my childhood included many of the usual tasks and recreations of a semi-rural, working-class life in 1970s America (household chores, swimming in streams, Sesame Street), what I remember most was the culture of questioning, debate, and a constant call to reflect and then take action. I was raised with a value system based on a fundamental suspicion of the dominant culture. Our ability to do good in the world was understood as dependent on each of us questioning orthodoxy, questioning authority, and holding all thoughts and actions up to ideals of personal and societal progress toward caring and equality.

Though the mores of the “turn on, tune in and drop out” generation defined our home life, we lived in an ordinary, semi-rural neighborhood in upstate NY. The following is an autobiographical narrative that explores how the many contradictions of an upbringing characterized by both countercultural 1960s ideologies and the necessity of learning to navigate “the system” set the stage for my ongoing quest to seek out and investigate educational settings that offer growing children reliable, holistic development support. As a PhD student in Education, the focus of my academic research revolves around inquiring into how the intentionally holistic education that we have thus far attempted defines its objectives and investigating the ways in which it does or does not meet those objectives.

MY STORY

Our living room featured photos of mom carrying activist banners at the head of protest marches, and my memories include listening to plans and reminiscences of demonstrations and civil disobedience. Whatever topics arose, conversation always seemed to turn to underlying imbalances and abuses of power in our present societal structure. This would inevitably include sometimes vivid descriptions of the resultant suffering and cost to the planet and its inhabitants. No conversation was complete without it culminating in an analysis of the role played by each of us in either perpetuating or upending “the system.”

The problems were everywhere; sexism, racism, classism, ageism, ecological devastation, economic inequalities, entrenched power structures that served the few at the cost of the many,... I was taught that these injustices were the direct result of choices made, not only by a few elite powerholders, but through the inaction and lack of questioning by innumerable men and women who chose not to rock the boat. We lived in relative comfort and security. This was because we were inheriting and paradoxically benefiting from a tragically broken system. It was up to each of us to work toward the righting of the historical wrongs that had created this state of affairs. The costs were tragic, real, and ongoing; the call to action was urgent. We could not help but perpetuate that which we did not question. Therefore, it was imperative that we actively and continually question.

Of all the slogans of the era, the one that epitomizes my understanding of the world was, “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.” My very earliest memories include not only overhearing but being casually engaged in

conversations with adults. It seemed normal and natural to me to be listened to and to have my ideas treated with interest. Adults often responded with their own thoughts, pushing me in my thinking where they saw fit and, at least in my recollection, taking my perspective seriously.

My childhood also included significant trauma, and my recollections consist more of my subjective sense of what things were like than of specific memories. Recent research on the workings of human memory reveals that our memories tend to be rewritten each time we revisit them, meaning that, whether vivid or not, memory is not a reliable source for objective historical truth (Lee, Nader, & Schiller, 2017). Nonetheless, according to Pinar (1994), the sense that we make of our recollections of our past can be put to use in “the method of *currere*” (*currere* being the Latin infinitive of curriculum). Pinar proposed that the purposeful recollection of one’s past educational experiences may be used to serve as a foundation for the development of an increasingly nuanced and justice-oriented approach to learning and teaching (Pinar, 2004).

The *currere* method consists of four steps or “moments.” The first is reflection on one’s recollections of educational experience. Second is the contemplation of one’s ideals for the future. Third is formed by an analysis of the relationship between the recollections and ideals in order to understand more fully, with more complexity and subtlety, one’s submergence in the present. The fourth and final phase is that of synthesis, in which one purposefully engages in a process of learning and re-learning toward a “re-conceptualized curriculum...an ongoing project of self-understanding in which one becomes mobilized for engaged pedagogical action” (Pinar, 2004, p. 37).

Thus, with *currere* in mind, the following is a window into my recollections of my educational past, how these recollections relate to my developing interest in rethinking and transforming public education, and how I came to design my dissertation research around the investigation of outcomes of the most popular educational pedagogies understood to exemplify holistic education.

REGRESSIVE MOMENT

Despite our counter-culture home life, it was my parents’ conviction that my brother and I go to public schools. We were not to be a part of the segregation and impoverishment of public education as a result of nonparticipation of white, privileged children. We were raised at an income level below the poverty line, but my parents were aware that our white skin and cultural and educational inheritance brought us significant privilege. I attended public schools for the whole of my K-12 education. This worked out fine from kindergarten through second grade. During those years, I was bussed to The Campus School, an experimental public grade school housed on a nearby state university campus. My memories of that time are vague and neutral: warmth, play, and beginning literacy and numeracy. I had a learning disability identified but not officially diagnosed while there, but I did not get the sense that this was either special or terrible. I noticed that other kids did not experience the world just as I did and that they came from different backgrounds, but that was peripheral to my experience of life.

In the Regan era, The Campus School was abruptly defunded and closed. I began 3rd grade as a student in a local public school. If I had previously gotten some hints that my upbringing and my parents’ convictions were not universally embraced, my introduction to the dominant culture as expressed in the new public school left me with no doubt. Unlike The Campus School’s diverse student body, which was created through a lottery system and bussing, the students in the new school all came from

a homogeneous group of families in a small circumference around the old, rural schoolhouse. They shared a world-view and approach to life that I could not decipher. I was in culture shock.

My recollection, as expressed using the vocabulary that I have at my disposal today, is the following. While at home and in The Campus School, I perceived the interactions between the people around me to be generally characterized by affection, interest, and respect. In the new environment, I found the children shockingly unkind to one another. The teachers appeared shockingly disinterested in that or anything else that I had come to understand as important. The generalized unkindness and disinterest were clearly tolerated, if I could not be sure that it was actually fostered, by the school's norms and rules.

If the social environment of school left me despairing and at a loss, the school's intellectual culture left me with actual contempt. My memories of the next few years include readings of endless chapters of simplified texts with equally simplistic questions at the end of each chapter, ditto after ditto sheet, rows of desks, and the demand of silence. Not only was I was compelled to spend day after day in a place that did not support my curiosity, but it seemed to be designed to discourage it! The reflection and critique that I had been taught was the basis of all growth and learning was not only missing, it was met with appall, castigation, and ostracization. I slowly developed outrage at the fact that so much of what was happening in that school seemed antithetical to what I had been taught was meaningful and important. The values espoused at home seemed nobler yet in direct opposition to the conformity required in school.

I have few specific memories of classwork and classroom experience, but what I remember most clearly is the ongoing, mental narration in which I began to engage. This running critique certainly kept me entertained and perhaps also provided a private and relatively harmless outlet for the critique that was not welcome in school. By this time, my parents had divorced and now spent most of their time working and back in school themselves. Like many of their generation, they traded in aspirations of revolution for the hope of changing the system from within. I became what was called a "latch-key kid," and most of my waking hours were spent at school with the remainder spent home alone with my little brother.

I had been given a lot of support to develop into a critically thinking and social justice-oriented person who was then thrown into an environment where that was neither supported nor apparently on anybody's radar. I was a lone Meathead in a world of Archie Bunkers. My inner narrator became my constant companion.

Why was it that there was no opportunity to really talk about anything?

How could this be called a place of learning if there was never time to ask questions?

What is the point of a social world based on teasing and put-downs?

Why doesn't anybody care how mean these kids are?

How did this whole thing get this way?

Is this place just an ignorance perpetuation machine?

Whether it was my contempt for the whole business that caused me to be ostracized or the ostracizing that drove me to unbridled contempt, the rest of my elementary school experience only strengthened my conviction that American schooling, in the form that I experienced it, was indeed more a part of the problem than it was a solution. This was, for me, a painful, daily experience and fodder for the sarcastic wit of my increasingly disillusioned mental narrator.

My social isolation peaked in sixth grade, the last year of elementary school. In

the larger ecosystem of middle school and high school, I began to find small numbers of students and teachers who either shared some of my thoughts, interests, and values or were interested enough in listening to them that my contempt and isolation were at least somewhat abated. I enjoyed learning new things, which were coming at a more challenging pace, and despite my learning disability, I was able to succeed academically with relative ease.

As a result of my facility with academics, I was tracked, with a relatively small group of other almost exclusively white, privileged kids, to the honors and advanced classes in every subject. In tenth grade, I compared notes on the content of math class with a friend who I knew to be perfectly clever (if behaviorally non-compliant). She had been tracked into the 3rd lowest of the 4 academic tracks in our school. Her homework in math consisted of writing out numbers long hand as though on a check. At that time, I was learning logarithms and being introduced to the concepts that underlie trigonometry.

Despite my ongoing critique of my schooling, I was grateful for, even proud of, my academic savvy. This girl, and every soul in her class (not to mention the whole body of students “below” her!), should have been given access to no less! The injustice of the educational opportunities I was afforded compared with theirs cemented my sense of outrage. This culminating moment of contrasting math curricula became the mental place holder for my decades of shock and dismay. How could so many years of schooling be associated with so little opportunity to think, such limited access to the thoughts of others, so little opportunity for free expression and critical debate, so much inhibition of feelings, such disinterest in caring and relationship building?

This moment and the preceding decade of conviction that the educational system was devastatingly wrong on the levels of both heart and mind are the ground in which my current academic focus was sown. It would be decades before I would conceive of education as a field of study, discover that there was an international conversation I could enter into on the subject, and learn of the work of Maria Montessori (1909/1964, 1946/1963, 1948), Rudolf Steiner (1985, 1997), A. S. Neill (1977), and other pioneering educators (e.g. Holt, 1967/2009) who, equally frustrated with the factory model of education, had endeavored to create systems of education based in a different paradigm.

My first exposures to Waldorf and Montessori schools came in my twenties when I met people who spoke of them. In these initial, superficial encounters, I gleaned that both pedagogies were somewhat dogmatic and rigid in their own rights, and I did not investigate further. It wasn't until the middle of my master's program that I ran into a series of people who spoke of their positive experiences with Waldorf. This motivated me to reconsider my initial dismissal of the methodologies. I included observations in a Waldorf school at the very end of my graduate studies, and though my interest was piqued, I remained quite ambivalent and did not follow up with deeper study.

PROGRESSIVE MOMENT

It wasn't until I had children of my own that I began to feel a sense of urgency relative to educational options. I did some soul searching about what I dreamed of in an educational environment. After a period of reflection and freewriting, I came up with the following short list of qualities that I felt should be modeled and cultivated in children's formative years: curiosity, caring, and connectedness. These were what I considered active, positive qualities in the domains of thinking, feeling, and being.

I dreamt of an environment that fostered the kind of critical thought and discernment that I had been encouraged to value in my early years, an environment

that supported children in the development of emotional health and fostered the formation of warm relationships among all actors in the school community. There was another dimension that I wanted to address that related to a sense of peacefulness and belonging in the world, though I found it hard to describe. The term “spiritual” did not sit well with me in that it was too amorphous and suggestive of religion. I will admit that I liked the idea of another “C” word once I had the first two, and connectedness allowed for the inclusion of many levels of belonging and harmony with the self, the community, the earth, the universe...

At that point, I had a sense of what I dreamed of and some vocabulary to describe it. With my own children reaching school age, I realized that what I urgently needed to know was, “What schooling options are actually out there?” Are there schools that could deliver or that aspired to similar ideals? It dawned on me (a little late, I guess) that the simple availability of a pedagogical option was the first criterion of import to parents looking for a school. Paralleling the reality of most of coastal America with reasonable population density, the educational alternatives available to my family (if we were willing to do some driving) were; conventional public school, a Waldorf, a Montessori, a Democratic free school, an active homeschooling community, two Catholic schools, a college preparatory academy, and two unaffiliated “progressive” private schools. The simple reality was that, even with the 50% financial aid packages offered, we were priced out of all but public school and homeschooling.

After a couple of years abroad in Brazil when my kids were still quite young, I began what would be a four-year adventure navigating a new set of responsibilities within the dual role of mother and teacher to my three-year-old son and seven-year-old daughter. These years held some of the best moments of my life. I felt blessed and lucky to be so present for my children’s day-to-day learning and growth. I took the attitude that there was no rush to any particular learning objective and that that precious time held the possibility to be joyful and life-affirming for all of us. My intention was to take it one day at a time, homeschooling for as long as it seemed to be a positive experience for all of us. I thought that we would continue as long as I felt I was able to personally honor and cultivate in them the sense that the thoughts, feelings, and inspirations that arose from within them were precious, valuable, and worthy of respect and attention.

My kids, especially my daughter, were interested and eager to join in tons of homeschooling activities. We spent time with Waldorf inspired, Montessori inspired, curriculum driven, and unschooling homeschoolers. We went on field trips to museums and historic landmarks, river ecology sailing trips, geologist guided mountain hikes, and cave explorations. My daughter and I had long conversations pouring over books about the origins of life on earth and the nature of the cosmos. I took her to pottery classes, theater classes, science classes, Spanish and French classes, library days, gym days, park days, and play dates. No two days or weeks were the same, sometimes we had my son in tow, and some days he was immersed with kids his age at the same, local, play-based daycare center both his sister and I had attended, me thirty years and she four years prior.

A significant part of our homeschooling was many, many hours in the car driving to our activities. During that time, we listened to the audio book series, “Story of the World,” an engaging, story-based run through world history produced by North American, Christian homeschoolers. My first instinct was to completely avoid this and all other religious-oriented resources. It was only after a friend who identified as a Pagan homeschooler shared how she used it that I decided to give it a chance, ready to pop it out at the drop of a hat if I found it inappropriate for us.

As it turned out, I genuinely enjoyed listening and re-familiarizing myself with some of the stories in the Western canon. The white, Western, and Christian influences on both the stories and the narrative stance became an important subject for discussion about what exactly we were listening to and what we could learn from it. I really valued having the opportunity to talk about the perspective from which it was being told and to expose my kids to my methods of analysis of the authors' perspectives. Just as my parents had done with me in my own childhood, I took every opportunity to problematize the simple, linear narratives presented in cultural artifacts like that one. I shared my thoughts, concerns, passions, curiosities, and unresolved questions, while bringing real space, time, and interest to eliciting my children's impressions, questions, and perspectives. It was important to me that the concepts such as dogma, religion, balance or imbalance of power, social justice, ecology, and sustainability were part of our day-to-day thoughts and discussions. The "Story of the World" series turned out to be one of the most fruitful means to highlight cultural narratives and invite the investigation of counter-narratives.

For the most part, this occurred quite successfully and naturally. As my daughter got a bit older and "pre-teen-er," she began to push back against my insatiable interest in analysis and my ever-present quest for supporting social justice ideals. By the time she adopted this stance, she had become a very capable self-advocate, competent interlocutor with adults and children alike, and eager, caring, and thoughtful participant in whatever social occasions she found herself.

There were three main factors that prompted the closure of our homeschooling adventure. First, dyslexia runs deep both in my family and in that of the kids' dad. Second, strong personalities and resistance to external authority are in both the nurture and the nature of our family. Third, the homeschool community where we were living was very transient, with each family more focused on coming and going based on their own needs and interests than in coming together as a cohesive community.

Practically speaking, the lack of consistent community meant that, even after a couple of years of homeschooling in our highly active homeschooling network, my daughter felt a real lack of connection to other kids her age. We both longed for a stable community with whom to share our learning adventure. At the same time, her learning and personality profile meant that learning to read and write was proving a painfully difficult and unpleasant process. She was in the middle of third grade when I concluded that her learning profile was indeed similar to my own and that she would be best served by being professionally evaluated for a learning disability.

At that point, the politics of educational funding played a crucial role in our lives. I investigated my options and spoke with other parents who had sought evaluation as homeschoolers and had encountered rejection of their requests or prolonged battles before their requests for evaluation were honored. I enrolled my daughter in public school so that she could have a publicly-funded neuropsychological evaluation with a less protracted battle and better likelihood of a positive outcome. After a year of advocating, she was able to have the testing carried out, have her learning disability diagnosed, and receive the support and accommodations she needed. At that point, she opted to stay in public school. I encouraged my son to give school a try for a year, and I decided to apply and then go back to school myself.

ANALYTIC MOMENT

Pursuing a PhD in education was my opportunity to apply a critical lens to the various pedagogies that I had a passing familiarity with through homeschooling. I discovered the body of literature of critical pedagogy that resonated with the critique

my inner narrator had been leveling for all those years (Freire, 1968; Gatto, 2000; Giroux, 2008; Kincheloe, 2008). I also found the holistic education literature (de Souza, 2000; J. Miller, 1986, 2007, 2011; R. Miller, 1997, 1991; Rudge, 2008), which resonated with my dreams of education ideals.

de Souza (2000) characterizes holism as a movement in education. R. Miller (1991) describes holistic education as based on the conviction that education is founded in the quest for meaning and social justice and in the holistic paradigm that contends that successful learning occurs when all dimensions of human development are attended to in equilibrium. The five domains of human development (J. Miller, 2007) are: intrapersonal (knowledge of self), interpersonal (emotional balance and connection to others), transpersonal (sense of connection and belonging), cognitive (knowledge, skills, and reasoning), and physical (health and embodied wellbeing). In the holistic paradigm, learning is successful when it fosters students' sense of connectedness and serves the ends of increased social justice.

There are a small number of prominent pedagogical approaches recognized as founded on holistic ideals (Rudge, 2008). Of these an even smaller number are widely available. These are, in order of availability (based on number of schools or, in the case of homeschooling, enrolled students): homeschooling, Montessori, Waldorf, and, to a significantly lesser degree, Democratic Free schooling (Education Revolution -Alternative Educational Resource Organization, 2018; NCES, 2018; North American Montessori Teachers Association, 2018; Waldorf Education, 2015). Utilizing the dual criteria of most widespread availability and recognized holistic underpinnings, I formulated a research agenda into these pedagogies. I researched the lives and philosophical influences of the founders of each pedagogy. I designed a research agenda that looked into the hopes and expectations of actors engaged with the most popular of these pedagogies: homeschooling, Montessori, Waldorf, and Democratic Free schooling.

I researched what motivates parents to choose one of these holistic pedagogies and found that families seeking out holistic education were indeed looking for the outcomes that the holistic theorists and pioneers intended (Florêncio-Wain, 2016). Next, I researched the intentions and expectations of educators in each of the three most available methodologies. I found that they too held intentions and expectations similar to those expressed in the literature (Florêncio-Wain, 2017). This research indicated that the most popular and available forms of holistic education not only define their mission as attending to all areas of human development, but at least in the cases that I investigated, are utilized by families that expect this outcome and educators that pointedly strive to achieve it.

The threads of my life were coming together. It has been a long process of coming to terms with my frustration in my conventional school experience, articulating my own educational ideals, discovering generations of authors with similar critiques, and encountering a few whose proposed solutions had evolved into pedagogies with large followings. While school options are limited, there is a significant and steadily increasing number of families accessing the most prominent holistic options. I now have the academic preparation and access to IRB approval for research and am poised to dig deeper into some of the questions that have woven through the fabric of my life: "What do people want out of schooling? How do we prioritize the goals of education? What happens when education is carried out based on a new set of priorities?"

SYNTHETIC MOMENT

The final step in the *currere* method is to synthesize—take stock of the history, the analysis, and the ideal—to make sense of these with an eye to where to go from here. As I described, my own family history did not prepare me for the expectations of mainstream public schools. Instead, it set me on a track of sharp critique. Through the reflective process of *currere*, I see that characterizing my initial reaction to public schools as “culture shock” is telling. In culture shock, an early phase of rejection and negativity tends to eventually be overcome by adaptation, acceptance, and appreciation. I guess, insofar as both my children are now in public school, I have come around to a more nuanced view that includes some acceptance and appreciation, even if my embrace of “the (school) system” includes many reservations.

Both my homeschooling experiences and my academic research are steps in my own mobilization toward Pinar’s (2004) call to “engaged pedagogical action” (p. 37). There are many paths to a more just world and to educating healthy, thoughtful, caring individuals who have self-awareness, a sense of belonging in the world, and feel connected to a larger community, however they define it. What I find compelling about holistic pedagogies is that, at least according to my research thus far, they self-consciously and purposefully set out to meet these goals. The extent to which they do or do not meet them, and whether or not there are any subgroups within the larger umbrella of holistic education for whom goals are met more often or more thoroughly, are my driving questions at this point.

The answers to these questions are valuable to any debates about potential public school reforms and to the much needed discussion of our societal ideals and how to reach them. The cultural evolution of a society requires dialog between its constituent parts. The extent to which the intentionally holistic education that we have thus far attempted does or does not meet its objectives is an important piece of information for our societal dialog. My own experience set me on a trajectory of inquiry based on the conviction that progress is urgently needed. What I most wanted to cultivate in my own children was the sense that their thoughts, feelings, and experiences are valuable and that following a combination of curiosity, opportunity, and intuition could be a valid, rewarding, and joyful approach to learning and to life.

My research has led me to understand that there are educational methodologies steeped in similar holistic intentions. Because my questions have to do with outcomes, particularly relative to the perspectives and understandings of former students, the next phase of my research will consist of studying the lives and meaning making of adult former students of holistic education.

In honor of the legacy of my parents’ generation, I recognize my privilege and seek to leverage it in service of the greatest good I can conceive: the transformation of our entrenched educational structures toward the intention of holistic development for all students. I must also recognize that part of the legacy of my upbringing (and personality) is a particularly large helping of idealism. There are those who would argue that the entrenched power-holders in our society have no interest in supporting such transformation and that without such support it is unrealizable.

My approach at this phase is to do the work that I see as needed to facilitate the change that I envision, at least temporarily, practicing non-attachment to the outcome. I can only place myself in the service of investigating what has arisen from the settings where holistic intentions are being held and bring that information full circle, offering it to any who would join me in seeking, in Pinar’s (2004) terms, “a re-conceptualized curriculum” with the aim of “social reconstruction, the achievement of selfhood and society in the age to come” (p. 4).

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