

# FROM MAINSTREAM SCHOOLING TO HOLISTIC EDUCATION

*A personal turnabout and a paradigm shift*

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## **Abstract:**

In this article, Dr Albert Ferrer delves into the very foundation of integral or holistic education in both pedagogic and philosophical terms, while he also elucidates the main features of this kind of perennial pedagogy, which is as old as mankind. Beyond some valuable pedagogic methods, Dr Ferrer insists on the basis of integral education, and this has to do with the vision or the world view; it is a matter of educational philosophy, since consciousness is the key. Many holistic pedagogies stay at the surface with play-way methods and self-learning strategies only. Dr Ferrer warns that without a shift in consciousness nothing will change and we will just repeat the old patterns and problems as it has been happening till now. At this point, Dr Ferrer dares to unfold the most crucial issue: the spiritual dimension of integral education, too often overlooked by modern prejudice and materialism. According to the author, this is the key, as it has been stressed by the greatest philosophers of education throughout history.

## **Keywords:**

Educational philosophy, Pedagogy, Integral, holistic education, Education in human values, Value education, New paradigm, Paradigm shift

### **Resumen:**

En este artículo, el Dr. Albert Ferrer profundiza en los fundamentos mismos de la educación integral u holística, tanto en términos pedagógicos como filosóficos, a la vez que aclara los principales rasgos de este tipo de pedagogía perenne, tan antigua como la humanidad. Más allá de algunos métodos pedagógicos valiosos, el doctor Ferrer insiste en la base de la educación integral, y esto tiene que ver con la visión o cosmovisión; es una cuestión de filosofía educativa, ya que la conciencia es la clave. Muchas pedagogías holísticas se quedan en la superficie, únicamente con métodos de juego y estrategias de autoaprendizaje. El Dr. Ferrer advierte que, sin un cambio de conciencia, nada cambiará y simplemente repetiremos los viejos patrones y problemas, tal y como ha estado ocurriendo hasta ahora. En este punto, el Dr. Ferrer se atreve a desarrollar el tema más crucial: la dimensión espiritual de la educación integral, demasiado a menudo pasada por alto por los prejuicios y el materialismo modernos. Según el autor, esta es la clave, como han subrayado los más grandes filósofos de la educación a lo largo de la historia.

### **Palabras clave:**

Filosofía educativa, Pedagogía, Educación integral, holística, Educación en valores humanos, Educación en valores, Nuevo paradigma, Cambio de paradigma.

## **1. A personal turnabout.**

It is well-known that the French philosopher, Rene Descartes, starts his famous “Discourse on the Method” by critically examining the educational process that he underwent when he was a boy. It is also a personal reflection upon my own education that brought me to the field of integral or holistic education in a comparative perspective East/ West. Furthermore, neutrality or objectivity does not exist, as quantum physics has made it more clear than ever while debunking the fallacies of well-established scientism –that is different from science-. This becomes even more critical when we enter the field of educational philosophy as attempted in this article. The most important things in the educational practice –namely the goals of education and hence the pedagogic principles- stem from a certain world view and from ethical/ philosophical considerations. In this article, we will delve into this philosophical depth of the educational process beyond the technocratic blindness that too often blocks both the thinking and the praxis in contemporary school systems.

Although Catalan by birth and born in the 2000 years old city of Barcelona, my parents decided to enrol me and my brother and sister at the French School of Barcelona, still today praised as one of the most prestigious schools of the city and the country. While following the national French syllabus till higher secondary level (Baccalaureat) the school would share all the characteristics of a typically European academic school for the middle/ higher class, with some Napoleonic touch up according to the French background.

To start with, I must simply say that in fifteen years of schooling –from three to eighteen- I did not have one single period of music or drama. There was only some pathetic period devoted in theory to drawing and painting in the primary and middle school, that is all, which means that the educational process was exclusively made of language, maths, science and social studies: pure academics in a competitive way and through academic pressure without any considerateness to fire out any student who could not follow the academic pressure cooker, which produced more than one child or teenager suicide that was conveniently covered up to perpetuate the system.



## II. A brief historical mapping.

Scholars have found it difficult **to map the history of integral education and identify the key historical contributors** since the core ideas of holistic education are as old as mankind and may be traced back to virtually all cultures of human history. Only modernity has imposed another world view radically cut from these core ideas -timeless and universal-. Still, some major figures and schools of thought can be easily identified, among which we would stress Vedanta, Buddhist philosophy and Plato/ Neo-Platonism in the ancient world, and Kant, Hegel and Rousseau/ Romanticism at the dawn of the modern age.

Together with Rousseau, the names of Pestalozzi and Froebel should be added. Among the Romantics, several authors manifested a keen interest in education –on holistic grounds-: Goethe, Schiller, Novalis, Jean-Paul, Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott, etc. In the XXth century, we should especially mention the heirs of Theosophy, R. Steiner and M. Montessori, together with the founders of American Pragmatism like J. Dewey and F. Parker, as well as the renowned father of Jungian psychology, C.G. Jung. More recently, we could point out some reputed names such as H. Gardner, D. Goleman, K. Wilber, A. Maslow, C. Rogers, etc. In the last decades, transpersonal psychology has brought a substantial contribution to integral education: transpersonal education.

Needless to say, **Western scholarship usually ignores the bestowal from other civilizations, in particular India**, where integral education comes back to the Vedic period, while modern India has provided the most profound formulations for this kind of pedagogy with great sages and philosophers, such as Vivekananda, R. Tagore, Yogananda, Aurobindo, Shivananda, J. Krishnamurti, Prabhupada, Sathya Sai Baba, etc. In no other country in the world are there as many schools of holistic education as in India. But, as Prof. R. Panikkar always reminded, the inertia of cultural imperialism still undermines the capacity of aperture of the West to a real intercultural dialogue.

## III. Main features of integral education.

1. In spite of historical, cultural or personal differences, **integral education presents a set of core characteristics**. To start with, **the main goal of education** would not be academic training but the formation of character, the education of the human being as such, and hence, the transformation of humanity towards higher states of consciousness



above the still prevailing selfishness, egoism, unlimited desire, division, conflict, violence, domination, etc. From this general perspective, holistic education aims at helping the growing child or youth to become what he or she is already in potential terms. One of the major figures of transpersonal psychology, **A. Maslow**, refers to it as “**self-actualization**” –or **self-realization** in the more traditional vocabulary of spiritual traditions-. As the great sage and educationist from modern India, Vivekananda, said in simple yet powerful words:

“The end of all education, all training. should be man-making.”

In the words of another eminent sage and educationist from modern India, J. Krishnamurti: “Present-day education is a complete failure because it has emphasized technique. In over-emphasizing technique we destroy man.”

2. The holistic perspective is concerned with **human realization at all levels**: physical, relational, ethical, emotional, intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual. Whatever is the concrete way of structuring and unfolding all the domains of human personality, integral education always engages students in an active role through their own learning process, which means that holistic pedagogies promote **the self-education of the child**. This kind of education also fosters positive values and attitudes, maturity and responsibility, together with community life and the sense of brotherhood and unity. Holistic pedagogies help the growing child overcome obstacles and difficulties and face challenges.
3. Nevertheless, **integral education is not confined to positive values and community life** –as in mere scouting for instance-; it goes far beyond since **it unveils all the depth of the human being**.

In Krishnamurti’s words: “The highest function of education is to bring about an integrated individual who is capable of dealing with life as a whole.”

At a strictly psychological level, integral education tries that each child strives to become all that he or she can be. Hence, there would not be deficits or disabilities according to pre-established standards, but rather differences in psychological tendencies and multiple intelligences –cf H. Gardner more recently-.

Sill, human realization would not be limited to psychological criteria, since the **inner spiritual dimension** would constitute the last and



most profound layer of any genuine integral pedagogy. As we warned above, this is not the realm of outer organized religions, but rather the depth of human consciousness. From this spiritual world view, integral education emphasizes the coherence between thought, word and deed, that is, the harmony between the inner and the outer realms. It also tries to develop in the child's mind the notions of interdependence and interconnectedness –so dear to the forerunners of quantum physics, such as Planck, Heisenberg, Bohr or Schrödinger-.

To sum up, integral education inherits the spiritual insights and wisdom of the ancient traditions of Philosophical Idealism, though it tries to adapt this millenary timeless heritage to the modern world. In Western civilization, Socrates would be the most paradigmatic figure while following the immortal inscription on the Temple of Delphos: -Man, know yourself, and you will know the universe and the gods.This can never become a rigid, dogmatic system fixed once for ever; it must be always evolving like life itself. Integral education is the opposite of dogmatism.

As Rudolf Steiner warned: “For the true teacher, pedagogy must be something living, something new at each moment. Everything that teachers carry in their souls as memories robs them of their originality.”

4. **A holistic curriculum will be very different from the typical modern school** –which reduces education to pure academics, and hence, to professional training from the predominant mechanistic ideology of Industrial Revolution-. Holistic pedagogies do not neglect academic training, although they will shift from the mechanic ways of academic teaching –quantity of information to be memorized and poured down in tests- towards true academic excellence lying in free creative thinking, imagination, inquiry and self-expression.
5. Beyond academic excellence, integral education will bring children to know about themselves. Holistic education is essentially Socratic –Know yourself- which is also at the core of the Indian Upanishads. Moreover, integral education knows that self-knowledge is essentially relational, since the human being is essentially social. Therefore, integral education will educate children through **relationship and Socratic dialogue**, something that the modern sage, Krishnamurti, expounded with sharp lucid insights. For Krishnamurti, mainstream schooling has been the opposite of the Socratic spirit:

“Instead of awakening the integrated intelligence of the individual, education is encouraging him to conform to a pattern and so is hindering his comprehension of himself as a total process.”

6. Integral education will attach great importance to **the teaching strategies, pedagogic tools and educational methods**, convinced that the mainstream school system has impoverished pedagogy by overstressing the academic lecture method and bringing it from top down, from college down to primary school. Holistic education will certainly favour a more Socratic/ dialectical method of teaching, while it will promote a more active role of the student.

Furthermore, integral education is by definition child-centred and value-based: it seeks to unveil the uniqueness of every child or human being instead of moulding the growing human being into fixed, rigid social patterns; it also seeks to unfold the fundamental human values –such as love, peace and compassion- from within. This means that there should not be any dualism in education; values and academics are inseparable. The whole educational process and campus



must be imbibed with values and a certain ethos. In the words of Maria Montessori:

“The pedagogical method of observation has for its base the liberty of the child; and liberty is activity.” “Discipline must come through liberty. (...) If discipline is founded upon liberty, the discipline itself must necessarily be active.”

7. Ultimately, **integral education is essentially transformative rather than informative**. In this world view, integral yoga as understood by the modern Indian sage, Aurobindo, is not a “fuga mundi” but rather it implies the very transformation of the empirical plane. As Albert Einstein warned, modern science and technology are like an axe in the hands of a pathological criminal –the ordinary mind, valueless, selfish and destructive-. For holistic pedagogies, the most fundamental goal of the educational process would be the transformation of the human being towards higher states of consciousness, basically more ethical, and ultimately spiritual. In Krishnamurti’s words:

“Education in the true sense is helping the individual to be mature and free, to flower greatly in love and goodness.”

8. On the other hand, **integral education emphasizes relations and dialogue, interdependence and interconnectedness**, whereas mainstream schooling has operated a deep fragmentation of knowledge and reality. This means that holistic pedagogies will favour interdisciplinary approaches and team work –without dismissing personal effort-. Just like systemic thinking in social studies and quantum physics in science, holistic education recognizes the various facets of reality as connected and integrated. Together with this transdisciplinary spirit of inquiry, integral education recognizes the dialectical nature of the cosmos, life and humanity.
9. **As per the evaluation methods, holistic pedagogies will avoid the mechanical tests so well developed in mainstream schooling** –till the most aberrant formulations in Asian countries like India, where students are forced to memorize without understanding in order to pour down this blind quantity of information in disciplinary tests-. Integral education prefers another kind of academic excellence based on conceptual exams, essays and commentaries, problem solving/ case study, experiential methods, etc, while it fully elaborates all the possible tools to encourage the spirit of inquiry and creativity of the student. The concept of the project becomes a major evaluation method in holistic schools.

As stressed by R. Tagore: “(...) in education the most important factor must be the inspiring atmosphere of creative activity.”

10. **The teachers' role** faces another major mutation from mainstream schooling to integral pedagogies. In the typically modern school, the teacher is regarded as a figure of authority who controls and punishes –just like the state-. Integral education comes back to **the profound spirit of the master/ disciple relationship** –the Gurukula of India or the Greek Paideia-. This means that the teacher is seen as a friend or mentor who accompanies the growing human being from love and respect for the unique nature of the child. Consequently, integral education will prefer dialogue to monologue, cooperation to competition.

**In conclusion**, integral education in the modern age culminates the historical drift towards human realization evolving through all cultures of mankind with new developments and achievements. Contemporary holistic education constitutes the humanism of our time, the actualization of millenary traditions of philosophy and wisdom at the dawn of a paradigm shift: from the modern reductionism and mechanism of Industrial Revolution towards a more holistic paradigm where consciousness is the key, as the godfathers of quantum physics have already understood.

