

Valuing the Whole Child: A Professional Inquiry

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What does it really mean to value the whole child? As I write this, it occurs to me that this is the question that I have been seeking the answer to for my entire career. For twenty-six years, without really understanding what the question was, I have been engaged in professional inquiry. In the early days, I thought the question was, "How do I become a better teacher?" Then I thought it was, "How do I help my students learn?" Considering the answers that I have come to and the conclusions I have drawn over the years, the question has suddenly become clear. Inquiry doesn't just lead to answers. It also takes us to better questions. I have been, and continue to be, searching for the answer to the question "What does it really mean to value the whole child?"

In 1981, during my first year of teaching, I asked a workshop presenter some questions about the teaching of reading. At the time, I thought I was asking, "How do I help my students learn to read?" and "How do I become a better teacher of reading?" His answer has stayed with me for twenty-six years. "Good teaching is based on two things. Knowledge and caring. The caring part isn't a problem for you. You need to learn more."

With the advantage of hindsight, this answer was my first clue to what it means to value the whole child. At the most basic of levels, it means that I care. I care deeply about each child and they can tell. If there is any magic in my teaching, that's where it is. When I have run out of theories or ideas on what to do next with a particularly challenging child, I have always been able to lean on the strength of our relationship for support. A relationship with a child also gives me a relationship with the parents or guardians. When families can tell that you genuinely care for their child, most situations are made better. I know this firsthand as a parent of a chronically ill child. My son's hospital chart is fourteen volumes long and I can recall every instance when a health care professional treated him with deep caring and respect. It matters that much.



So here I was at the very beginning of my teaching career, fresh out of four years of intensive learning at university and someone whom I respected was saying that I didn't know enough. It could have been devastating, but it wasn't. Somehow he also managed to convey the impression that this was okay. You didn't have to know everything, you could learn as you go. I found this to be an incredibly empowering idea. It meant that I was not only responsible for my students' learning, but my own as well. What was it that I needed to know? I thought I was in search of how to be a better teacher and how to help my students learn more effectively.

Multiple Intelligences

When I first became aware of Howard Gardner's (1985) theory of multiple intelligences, I embraced it as an answer to the question, "How do my students learn?" Some of them are like me; they learn mainly by reading, writing and talking. Our preferred way in is linguistic. Others prefer logical-mathematical ways of understanding. Typically, as teachers we have provided many learning opportunities for students with these abilities. Gardner expanded our view of intelligence

by helping us to see other ways through which children could learn. He identified eight intelligences:

- linguistic
- logical-mathematical
- spatial
- musical
- bodily-kinaesthetic
- interpersonal
- intrapersonal
- naturalist

If I provide you with many different ways of learning and showing what you know, I am telling you that there are many ways "to be smart" and that I value all of them. If I

honour who you are as a learner, you will too. To truly value the whole child I must make the learning more important than the teaching.

Who you are as a learner is important to me. Where you are as a learner is equally important. Valuing the whole child is accepting the whole child. I must know your strengths, your interests, your challenges and your needs. I must know and accept that it is my job to help you grow as a learner. To value the whole child is to teach children not simply curriculum.

My students need to see me as a learner. They need to witness my struggles, my resilience and persistence as a learner. Donald Graves (1991) has described teachers as the chief learners in the classroom. Initially, I thought he meant that we should be learning about our students. Now my interpretation is quite different. I think he means that we need to explicitly show how we learn; to use our own learning as a model. As the most experienced learner in the classroom, I need to mentor my students in both the art and science of learning. Building on the model of my learning, the next step is for students to discover how they learn.

Brain-Compatible Teaching

This need for students to learn about their own learning led to exploration of current brain research and how my teaching could become more brain compatible. Brain research is giving us the “why” for many things that we have known for years, as well as highlighting new ways for us to improve learning. I knew it was important to create a safe, caring environment. I didn’t know that for some children, learning is impossible without it. Knowing the relevant brain research and building many of my teaching practices and academic rituals on its foundation has become part of valuing the whole child for me. Martha Kaufeldt (1999) describes it very clearly.

The brain’s capabilities are enhanced by positive social interactions. (Kaufeldt, 1999, p. 59)

Two brains really are better than one. Children need to work together. To honour this need I ensure that there is a balance of individual, partner, small group and whole group times in my classroom. I used cooperative learning strategies in my classroom for years. Now I knew why it worked.

Children are more likely to engage in content when they can see its connections to their real world. (Kaufeldt, 1999, p.85)

The brain needs to know the relevance of what we are doing before it really becomes engaged. Teaching a strategy that strong readers use to comprehend non-fiction text is not enough. I must also teach why they use it and when it is helpful. Then I must give students an opportunity to use it as researchers on topics of interest.

Basic physical and psychological needs must be satisfied in order for the brain to be able to focus on complex tasks. (Kaufeldt, 1999, p.73)

My students have a water bottle at their desks. We have a reasonable, respectful system for leaving the room to go to the washroom. If someone is hungry, we try to address it. We take frequent “brain-breaks”, giving time to move, process, rehearse and practice because the research shows that this is key to learning.

Choice Theory

William Glasser’s (1999) Choice Theory has long been my guide when it comes to meeting children’s psychological needs. Glasser says that we all have the need to belong, to have fun, power and freedom. My goal is to structure our classroom in such a way that children can meet these needs and learn what they need to learn.

The need to belong — Children need to feel connected to each other, to you, to the classroom and to the learning. They need to feel valued within the group. We all spend the month of September laying the foundation for that community. Each time there is a wobble, a conflict, a change or a need for celebration we build on that foundation.

The need to have fun — If you build it they will come. If the work is engaging they will learn. When there is joy and play in the learning children rarely need to meet that need by derailing the learning.

The need for freedom — Children in my classroom have choice. They don’t make all of the decisions, but they do make the developmentally appropriate ones. I strive for balance between teacher and student choice. In their book bags I choose some books based on what is just right for them and they choose some based on interest. I choose some of the partners they will work with and they choose some of them. I choose some of the writing genres we will work on in Writer’s Workshop and they choose during free writing time.

The need for power — All children need to feel respected and valued for who they are. They also need to know how to value and respect others. They need to have

leadership roles within the classroom and the opportunity to demonstrate their independence as citizens of our community.

Social Responsibility

Believing this led me to very explicit teaching of social responsibility. Children in my class have the language of social responsibility. They can explain what it looks like, sounds like and feels like to show respect. They set social responsibility goals for themselves and collect evidence to show their progress. We have criteria for what it means to be a good citizen of our classroom community. We assessed our actions as meeting expectations, exceeding expectations or not yet within expectations.

Ethic of Deep Caring

And yet something was missing. Students thought it was about behaviour. Hearing Barbara Colloroso again recently, I realized that my students did not understand that it must come from an ethic of deep caring. I must be more purposeful in showing them that all I do in our classroom is because of my deep caring for them, for our community of learners, for our school community and the many communities we belong to as global citizens.

I have come full circle. Twenty-six years ago I began my career with 32 Grade Ones, a university degree, passion, enthusiasm and an ethic of deep caring. When nudged by a mentor to realize that this wasn't quite enough, I began a professional inquiry. Early on I just asked questions and looked for answers. What will make me a better teacher? How can I help my students learn? How do children learn to read? What are the multiple intelligences? What works for me? Then I began to reflect and make connections. There is definite overlap in the answers I have found. They come together for me in a way that says, "Yes, this is right for me and it is right for my students". For me, right now, valuing the whole child means incorporating the multiple intelligences, brain compatible teaching,



Choice Theory, social responsibility, and an ethic of deep caring into my daily practice. This connection between belief and practice is my quality control. It is how I know that I am valuing the whole child. If it doesn't match my beliefs, if it doesn't contribute to valuing the whole child; it doesn't belong in my practice. Lucy Calkins (1994) says that as teachers it is possible for us to create an entire world within the walls of our classrooms. We owe it to ourselves and our students, she says, to create a world based on our beliefs about what is important in teaching and learning and living.

Valuing the Whole Child

I have come back to knowledge and caring. Upon reflection, my path is not a circle but a spiral. I have come back with more knowledge and with an understanding that the caring must be deeper than "I love kids".

My experiences and learning have taken me to a new place in my inquiry. I have found some answers and I have some new questions. Each time I read a new professional book, attend a conference or engage in professional dialogue, I will now ask, "Is this something that will help me value the whole child?"

References

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