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Equinox: portrait of a holistic school

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a qualitative study of Equinox Holistic Alternative School, an elementary school in Toronto in its seventh year. There were a total of 27 people interviewed including teachers, parents, and students. The data indicated that the school is meeting its primary goal of educating the whole child.

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Today we hear the mantra from ministries and departments of education that schools need to prepare students to compete in the market place. It is a materialist vision of education that denies the wholeness of the person. In Toronto, there is a public elementary school that has devoted itself to broader vision of educating the whole child. Originally named the Whole Child School, the Equinox Holistic Alternative School is a JK-8 school with 200 students in its seventh year of operation. It is the largest alternative school in the TDSB and has a waiting list of students wanting to attend.

I have had a long connection with this school as I was approached two years before it began to help set up and advisory board to help the teacher–parent group develop their proposal for the school. Since then I have had various connections with the school. In 2015, I conducted a qualitative study where I interviewed teachers, parents and students to see whether the school was realising its vision of teaching the whole child. This paper describes that study.

Background to the study

In June of 2007, I was approached by group of teachers and parents that were applying to the Toronto School Board to start up an alternative school called the Whole Child School. They were working on a proposal to the Board to begin an elementary school with a holistic approach to education. They asked me help set up an Advisory Committee that would provide support and guidance to their project.

The rationale for the school

An organising committee developed a proposal for the school that was submitted to the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). The proposal for the Whole Child School (2007) refers

to the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) and their emphasis on whole child education. ASCD's commission on the Whole Child was cited in the rationale of the school.

Educators and the public have long agreed that education must both include and go well beyond the academics of reading, writing, and mathematics. Yet for our educational system and communities to develop whole children, we must act, not talk; act in fundamentally different, not marginally different ways; and act as schools, communities, and nations to ensure a deservedly brighter future for our children.

We are calling for a simple change that will have radical implications: put the child at the center of decision making and allocate resources – time, space, and human – to ensure each child's success. We call for a shift in how schools and communities look at young people's learning. Lay aside the perennial battles for resources and instead align those resources in support of the whole child. (7)

The objectives for the Whole Child School stated in the proposal included:

- (1) To nurture, inspire and educate the Whole Child.
- (2) To establish a holistic alternative public school offering kindergarten to grade 8 (graduated start with grade 6 in first year, grade 7 in second year and grade 8 in third year) in Toronto-Danforth, Ward 15 for September 2008. (The school actually began with grade 5 and one grade added on a yearly basis)
- (3) To find a landmark public holistic school within Canada. To create a prototype elementary school that becomes a leading benchmark for public holistic education.
- (4) To directly respond to ASCD's priority of focus on the Whole Child and fulfil the overwhelming community demand among TDSB parents and students for a public school dedicated to holistic education.

I would note the third objective that focuses not just on the school itself but on its potential as a catalyst for change in public education. This will be discussed later in this paper. To achieve these objectives, the proposal focused on four main areas: vision, governance, curriculum and community.

Vision

In creating a vision for the school, they cited a passage from my book *The Holistic Curriculum* (Miller 2007).

We care about children. We care about their academic work. We want them to see the unity of knowledge. We want students to see how subjects relate to one another and to the students themselves. We find that the arts, or more generally an artistic sense, can facilitate connections between subjects.

We care about how children think, and in particular, we try to encourage creative thinking. We want the students to be able to solve problems and use both analytical and intuitive thinking in the process.

We care about the physical development of the student. We devote part of the curriculum to activities that foster healthy bodies so they feel 'at home' with themselves.

We care about how students relate to others and to the community at large. We focus on communication skills, and as the students develop we encourage them to use these skills in a variety of community settings. We encourage the community to come to the school, particularly artists who can inspire students' aesthetic sense.

Most of all, we care about the students' being. We realize that the final contribution that they make to this planet will be from the deepest part of their being and not just from the skills we teach them.

We can try to foster the spiritual growth of the student by working on ourselves as teachers, parents and community to become more conscious and caring. By working on ourselves, we hope to foster in our students a deep sense of connectedness within themselves and to other beings on this planet. (12)

The proposal states that this statement could find its place on a plaque on the wall of the Whole Child School.

Governance

The school seeks to work within the framework of the Ministry of Education of Ontario and the TDSB. Within this framework, an Organising Committee for the Whole Child School was established to guide the initial development of the school prior to its launch. Also important to the process was the establishment of an Advisory Board that would provide support and leadership to the process of setting up the school. One of its specific purposes was to 'provide thought leadership and practical guidance on matters related to *whole teaching* (my italics). Advice with respect to appropriate instructional approaches and how individual teachers can adapt them into their own rhythms, inclinations and subject matter' (16). The board was also to provide 'thought leadership and guidance on matters related to the holistic curriculum' (16).

As indicated above, I was asked to help identify individuals who would sit on this advisory committee, which initially consisted of 12 members. The committee included individuals working in Waldorf education, Montessori education, private holistic schools operating in the Greater Toronto Area, as well as teachers from the Toronto School Board, and academics from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, Ryerson University and York University. This committee met once a month from September 2007 to June 2009 and worked under the guidelines set out in the original proposal. The committee gave feedback to teachers who were developing a curriculum for the school.

Curriculum

Originally, the Organising and Curriculum Committees looked at Waldorf education as a primary framework for the Whole Child School. However, the committee felt that other holistic pedagogies should also be included. The proposal stated:

It was at this juncture that we began discussions with Jack Miller regarding the use of his book, *The Holistic Curriculum*, and forging a formal relationship in support of Whole Child School. *The Holistic Curriculum* provides an excellent curriculum framework, combining the best practices of numerous approaches, and is an ideal template for the development of a holistic curriculum specific to Whole Child School. (21)

The Holistic Curriculum presents six basic connections which the school has used as a framework for the programme. These connections include:

- *Thinking connections*, which focus on connecting analytic and intuitive thinking. At Equinox this connection is called Intuition and Intellect Connections.
- *Body Mind connections*, which encourage the student to see and experience the relationship between mind and body.
- *Soul connections*, which nourish the student's inner life.

- *Subject connections* that relate the different subjects through integrated curriculum.
- *Community connections*, which focus on building community within the classroom, the school, and extending this sense of community so students see themselves as part of the global community.
- *Earth connections* that facilitate the student's relationship with the earth preferably through direct experience such as gardening.

Community

Equinox is a school within a school and occupies the third floor in Roden Public School in the east end of Toronto. It resides in what is referred to as 'Little India' because it includes many residents with connections to India. The school was built in the late 1960s and has large open areas. There is a large school yard with several trees. The school has received funding from the Ministry to make improvements on the grounds that support the focus on being outside during the school day.

I was at the school on a cold night in February when registrations began for its first year. The gym was packed with parents and children. In that first week, there were 320 applications for 160 spaces so that eventually a lottery was used to select the incoming students.

In the study, I asked teachers to describe the type of student that attends Equinox. Some of the words they used included verbal, artistic, imaginative, curious and entitled. The principal said,

They are coming well equipped academically because they come from families- middle class and up. They are more open to ideas and to social issues of society. Some come because things have not worked in regular school setting so they are looking for something else and coming with unique needs that overlooked in other alternative settings.

One teacher's description: *There is a wide range of students. There are some who are calm, centered, rooted, focused, really bright. There are some that are the opposite- loud, demanding.*

Finally, most of the students are white. The lack of diversity will be discussed under challenges that face the school. However, the students do interact with students from the more diverse population at Roden during lunch, recess and some planned activities that include both schools.

The original proposal also stated that the school could be a model for other schools to follow.

Whole Child School has the potential to be a leading prototype school within the Toronto District School Board. We possess all the key cornerstones for the success of a school: a strong, clear vision that resonates with our communities, a governance model backed by solid industry expertise, a curriculum geared specifically to our school, and tremendous support from all stakeholders in our community.

The concept for Whole Child School belongs in the public school system. Holistic education is no longer a niche interest – it is for every child, everywhere. The largest professional association of educators in the world has identified holistic education as their top priority – evidence that the mainstream has embraced this fully. Whole Child School is perfectly timed to bridge the emerging theory and the community demand to create an exemplary school. (34)

I asked the parents about whether they believed Equinox could serve as model and their responses are presented later in the paper.

The study

This study draws a portrait of Equinox school based on interviews conducted with teachers, the principal, parents and students. Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot developed the method of portraiture. She writes that a portrait:

is designed to capture the richness, complexity and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences. The portraits are shaped through dialogue with the portraitist and the subject, each one participating in the drawing of the image. The encounter between the two is rich with meaning and resonance and is crucial to the success and the authenticity of the rendered piece. <http://www.saralawrencelightfoot.com/origin-purpose.html>

A proposal was developed to send to the TDSB ethics review board. The study has five questions to help develop the portrait. These include:

- (1) How successful has the school been in achieving the vision of holistic education? What are examples of the schools successes?
- (2) How do teachers in the school attempt to bring the vision of holistic education into classroom practice? What are some key elements in holistic teaching being used in the classrooms?
- (3) What are the major challenges that the school has faced and continues to face?
- (4) How has the school met these challenges?
- (5) Can Equinox serve as possible model for other holistic schools?

I first met with the Equinox School Council to seek their approval of the study. Once I received approval from U of Toronto Ethics Review and the TDSB board, I approached the teachers for interviews. I interviewed teaching staff that had been there at least one year. Including the principal, there were nine who participated. The teachers then suggested parents that I could interview. They contacted the parents to see if they would be interested. In one case a parent recommended another parent. I approached 12 parents and in the end 9 parents agreed to be interviewed. Two parents were interviewed alone. The other seven parent interviews included their children. A total of nine students were interviewed. Four of these were graduates of Equinox that are now in high school. Six of the interviews occurred in the homes of the families that participated in the study. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed to identify the major themes.

Researcher's role

As mentioned above, I was connected to school from its conception. However, my involvement has varied over time. Below are the activities I participated in:

- Selection of advisory committee and member of that committee (2007–2009).
- Writing a chapter on the school in *Whole Child Education* published in 2010 (Miller 2010).
- Book launch held with the support of the Equinox community (2010).
- *The Holistic Curriculum* is given to new staff members (This was done on the school's initiative).
- Sitting in on two staff meetings in 2012.
- Going with teachers and students to Ashbridges Estates Park in 2013.
- Initiating and carrying out this study.

Clearly, I am not an 'objective' observer since I have been supporter of the school from the beginning. However, in the study, I asked both parents and students about the challenges and problems. The participants were very candid in addressing problems with the school. I also found a consistency of responses around several of the major themes from both parents and staff, which I believe supports the validity of the study. Ideally more parents would have been interviewed but this was an unfunded study, which limited that number of people that could participate. Still there were a total of 27 participants. Given the limitations of the study, I believe this is a fairly accurate portrait of Equinox in 2015. The study can be seen as a collection of mini portraits that were 'painted' by teachers, parents and students.

Themes

The major themes discussed in the study include:

- Conceptions of holistic education held by teachers and parents.
- Meeting expectations around the vision.
- Curriculum connections – Community, Earth, Subject/Thinking, Body/Mind, Soul/Spirit.
- Assessment.
- Issues around equity.
- Successes/Challenges.
- Equinox as a model.

Holistic education

I asked the teachers, the principal and parents about their conception of holistic education. Here are the responses from three *teachers* at Equinox.

The head, heart and hands. My vision includes the parents and connecting with the community. Vision grows as we co-create it. An example of this is the pollinating garden. There is a group of parents that work together and wanted to help with the garden. We co-created the garden together.

It is good teaching. Reach every kid and engage them. Let them ask questions and go on a journey with them and help them find answers to those questions.

Holistic education includes reverence and connectedness: Also the soul aspect is part of it. Experiential learning within a larger framework so kids feel comfortable.

Some of the *parents'* conceptions included:

Head, hands and heart. Incorporating all kinds of learning techniques.

Teaching the whole child. Beyond reading and writing, it includes how they are doing emotionally and the social dynamics. The latter is very important to me.

It means encouraging kids to think in all different directions. Integrate subject matter. Also thinking about themselves and their communities. Self-knowledge, coming into your own as a person. Worked well for my daughter.

Holistic education means a sense of community where people feel responsible for each other. Also seeing the world as a fragile place ... Also to examine what it means to be a good person.

One former *student* now in high school said, 'Focuses on the whole child. Not just teaching academics. Really teaches the entire body'.

In general, there was a broad consensus that holistic education focuses on teaching the whole child-head, hands and heart and uses a broad range of learning approaches to achieve this. It is also seen as something that is changing. One person said, 'It emerges. It is an organic way of teaching where the child is the driver'. Finally, the vision includes an inclusive and engaged community.

Meeting expectations

The teachers and parents were then asked whether the school is meeting their expectations around holistic education. The nine *parents* were unanimous that the school met or exceeded their expectations:

Absolutely it has.

Looking back now that my daughter is in her second year of high school, it surpassed my expectations because I see how well adjusted she is. Sometimes I questioned whether she was learning the curriculum but she has done great in high school academically. She is on the honor roll.

The daughter of one mother had had negative experiences in her previous school where she felt excluded. The mother said it met her expectations: 'She was able to thrive in that environment [Equinox]. The teacher was able to create an environment where her gifts would shine. She began to love school'.

Another mother's son had been bullied in his school and at one point did not want to go to school. She said, 'Equinox met my expectations. It was amazing, wonderful. I had peace of mind sending him there'.

One parent who immigrated to Canada said, *Equinox is remarkable*. 'We are beyond grateful and happy that Canada offers alternative education ... At recess you see children of different ages playing together. Its amazing what you see- the amount of compassion and empathy'.

Totally exceeded my expectations. Teachers are very dedicated. I have had my kids in day care and my daughter went to two other schools and this is best group of teachers I have met.

There were great teachers at Equinox. Spectacular!

A mother, who had her two sons at Equinox with one graduating and now in high school said, 'Yes it has met my expectations. I have seen the development in my kids. They care more about others and they care more about the planet'.

Yes, it has. It really has. I hoped it would be place where teachers and community work together on things and I find that to be the case. It has come so far in a short time ... I like that is being done in the middle of the public school system and it can influence other schools in the system. It can show how education can be delivered differently. I was talking to today with another parent about designing an outdoor classroom and I thought how great is this that this kind of discussion can happen. I think it is a great place.

The parents' comments focused on the quality of the teachers there are in helping the school meet the expectations. The last parent commented how the school has developed in the seven years.

The *teachers* also felt they were able to achieve their vision of holistic education even though there have been significant challenges. Here are some of their comments.

Yes. It has been a journey. In the beginning it was very abstract and hard to pin down exactly what it is. It can change based on the group of kids you have each year. What are their strengths and weaknesses? We have a really supportive admin and they want us to be leaders and creative and try new things ... I feel it is evolving in a positive direction.

We have an environment that is able to 'hold the kids.' Particularly kids who have had difficulty in other schools. It is a harbor to parents, and teachers who care about sustainable living. There is an authenticity to it.

Yes. Being outside and having the students learning about their environment in an inquiry based way. I can work with kids at their own level. I am given freedom to do that at this school, which is beautiful.

I have been able to realize my vision in the classroom. Freedom of alternative school has allowed us to achieve the vision ... Outdoors is important to me in teaching and is healing for me. Children being enchanted by nature also inspires me. The ravine, Ashbridges Estates, and parks being available are important.

One of the new teachers this year felt that teaching at Equinox was like a dream come true. The freedom to develop the programme clearly is one of the key factors in the success of the school. The support of the administration is also a central factor in encouraging teachers to be innovative.

The teachers and parents also identified problems that the school faces and these are discussed in the section on challenges. Still the overall consensus among the teachers and parents I interviewed was that the school is meeting and in some cases surpassing expectations in delivering holistic education.

The six connections

As noted earlier, the programme at Equinox is developed in part around the six connections identified in *The Holistic Curriculum*. What follows is a description of those connections and comments from teachers, parents and students.

Community

Everyone I interviewed mentioned the strong sense of community that exists at Equinox. Here are some of the comments from *teachers*.

As an ethnic minority I feel incredibly valued. The whole staff works together and makes decisions by consensus. We like to do things together and try new things ... So many parents are supportive.

We build a very tight community ... From my experience in other schools one of the successes is how we treat each other. Of course there are little squabbles, but overall the way we are open to new ideas as a group is a real positive.

Another teacher who is fairly new to the school said,

It was great to walk into the school and be respected not just a teacher but as a person. You are honored and loved. To have your opinion valued. To have the amazing support of administration. Also parents volunteering, giving presentation, giving their time. It is just incredible. One of the things is the community that people have built. So happy to be part of it.

I really like the school. It is a warm environment. It is very inviting. There is a real sense of community. Parental involvement is great and I have parents in my classroom everyday. It is like we

are one unit working together. It really works here. It really works naturally and beautifully in the younger grades. I like that the most.

Some comments from *parents*,

One of the founding parents said, 'Love the community. We are like minded and are very supportive of the teachers and the whole philosophy.'

I love the community that I feel a part of. People are generous and care about our children.

One father said, 'There is a special sense of community. When a father of one of the kids died it brought the community even closer together.'

One mother talked about how being involved with the school had changed her life.

I am grateful my son is going to Equinox which means I will be involved with the school for another 8 or 9 years. We look after each other helping with kids, picking them up at school, doing a dinner, etc. The school has given us a bigger picture of life. Rather than just working for survival we are working for a better world.

Some parents mentioned how responsive the teachers were to their concerns. One said, 'My concerns were welcomed by the teachers ... Very welcoming environment for me and my family.'

Finally, several present and former *students* also commented on community.

One current student said, the teachers 'get to know you as a person'.

Two of the students who had graduated commented on the community. One said 'Tight community with students. Easy to work with everyone because of close relationships'. Another graduate commented,

I really like the focus on community. There was a collective sense there. We went on a lot of trips together. We planted trees together at Rouge valley. We had assemblies with the younger kids. Sometimes annoying. Why do we have to with little kids? But it was nice that we had connection with all the other grades and we had the connection to be one community.

The community at Equinox is developed through *celebrations, using circles, and employing looping*.

Celebrations and rituals

There are several celebrations and rituals held throughout the year that involve teachers, students and parents and help create the Equinox community.

Acorn ceremony. One of the first ceremonies of the school year is where the Grade 8 students welcome the new kindergarten students with an acorn. The new students go under a rainbow bridge. There are a special set of chairs that are also included that help give a sense of continuity to the ceremony. It is held outside with lots of parents in attendance and one of them tells a story. This ceremony is also used to welcome new teachers to the school. One of the teachers said they try to keep the ceremonies simple and grounded.

Day of the dead. Students go home and interview their parents and then they write biographies of past family members. On the Day of the Dead, they bring pictures of some of these individuals. A table and altar are set up and there is Mexican music and food.

One teacher commented, 'It was so beautiful when we honored the father of one of the staff here'. After lunch the students go into their classes, sit in a circle and read their biographies. One student brought in a song that connected with their grandfather.

A teacher commented, 'They also can choose a public figure and one student picked Robin Williams, who died that year and his description was very deep and beautiful'.

The students also honour a pet that has died.

Winter fair. This is organised by one of the founding parents. Held in the gymnasium with special decorations before Christmas, there are performances from the children and singing. Again it brings the whole community together. One of the parents said the Winter Fair is 'magical, beautiful'.

Play day. This an event that brings Roden and Equinox together and is run by students in Grades 7 & 8 from both schools. It is held in January or February.

Earth day. Another large event that includes the whole community is held on the beach at Ashbridges Park. Students are broken into small groups – clans. Each clan does something special such as dressing up as an animal. The older students go first and build a labyrinth in the sand. The year the school focused on bees in the curriculum and many students worked together to build a giant bee sculpture. A lot of thought and planning goes into the event as there are activities and games all day. The special chairs used in the acorn ceremony are used here as well. The day usually ends with singing.

Graduation. Students graduating from Grade 8 commented on the last trip they did together which involved going outdoors for two days and staying in tents. One night involved being on your own for the whole night. One parent commented that after the trip the students were asked what they learned and they said that things do not always go the way you think they will which is an important life lesson. One student, who is now in high school, said the experience was 'amazing'. 'I could make the experience my own'.

Circles

In the school circles also build community. Every morning the classes meet outside in circles where they do meditation, yoga, Qi Gong and other activities together. Circles have also been used to deal with behavioural issues. One teacher said:

I meet with students in a circle when there is a problem. We also do this as teachers. People actually practice what they preach here. It is wonderful.

One teacher held circles when there was some bullying. She was moved by what happened in the circles and said it was 'exhilarating' for her. One parent whose son was in Grade 6 said the circle 'allowed a safe environment for talk. Gave the students tools to deal with interpersonal issues'. She also mentioned that parents were involved in side circles and that students sometimes initiated a circle. Her son said the 'circle time was helpful and that it was something we wanted to do'.

Looping

Looping is when a student stays with their teacher for more than one year. One student stayed with one teacher for as long as five years. Looping was more common in the junior and intermediate divisions where several students had the same teacher for two or three years. The rationale for looping is that helps the students bond with the teacher. The teacher knows the student and does not have to learn about a whole group of new students every

year. The mother of one student who was with the same teacher for several years commented, 'The teacher was able to work with each student and draw on their strengths and really make them part of a community'. A teacher who worked with students for more than one year could witness real growth in the students.

Earth connections

Another strong connection in the school is with the earth. As mentioned previously, each day starts with the classes going outside first thing in the morning and meeting in a circle. This occurs even on cold days in the winter. The kindergarten children also spend a great deal of time outdoors. One of the kindergarten classrooms is on the ground level so they have easy access to being outside. One parent whose child was in kindergarten commented that 'kindergarten was magical with the focus on outdoors and play based learning'. The primary curriculum focuses on nature – the land, plants, water and animals.

Fortunately, there are many areas close to the school that allow for being in the nature – Ashbridges Estates, a ravine and other parks. Another place that students have visited is the Brickworks. Here they did a *pond* study in the spring. Parents again were involved and set up learning stations there. One station focused on plants, another on birds and one on insects. At the end they had scavenger hunt that also involved a mapping exercise that consolidated the whole experience. One parent commented that her child's experience of pond study in a previous school was going to the pond and filling out a worksheet. She said, 'It was different from the pond study at Equinox where they were really engaged'.

In all the outdoor experiences, the students keep a *nature journal*. Students learn observation skills and to record their observations. There is also a lot of freedom to inquire, draw and measure. Sometimes the students even write songs based on their observations. These journals become books that the students keep over several grades. One teacher said, 'Their books have to feel authentic to me. We do not have time for frivolity. So everything has to mean something. Our principal showed the books to other principals'.

The *p.i.n.e. project* is an important part of connecting to nature. The vision of p.i.n.e. from their website is:

Our mission is to build healthy communities, deeply connected to the natural environment. To achieve this, we deliver programmes focused on building relationships between self, others and the environment. Using music, drama, storytelling, naturalist studies, stewardship, outdoor adventures, games, play and intergenerational learning, we weave it all into a 'culture of nature connection' empowering our mantra: *be more, need less*.

This project encourages mentoring. The students break into groups before a field trip and work together under the guidance of a p.i.n.e. teacher and Equinox teachers and parents. The p.i.n.e. teachers are skilled at helping students observe and inquire into nature.

All the students I interviewed commented positively about p.i.n.e.. One parent said the experience was very positive. P.i.n.e. requires the school to raise funds for the project which raises issues of equity since not all parents can contribute. This will be discussed further under challenges.

Subject connections/inquiry

Since these two connections are closely related at Equinox, they are discussed together in this subsection. One teacher commented that connection is a 'big thing' at Equinox and said that 'students can see and make connections.' Another teacher said that two main foci at Equinox are fostering the connection to nature (e.g. earth connections) and integrating subjects through the arts as much as possible. This teacher indicated he was moving to project-based learning. He also uses inquiry-based learning. He likes it and said, 'I do not have to know everything and that leads to my growth. It is very exciting. I just don't repeat topics every year.'

One integrated project was studying salmon. There was a salmon hatchery in a junior classroom. Students could see the growth of salmon. Math and science inquiry activities were developed around the salmon. One parent commented that this project brought all the subjects together. She said, 'they were learning different subjects without realizing that they were learning. It was magical. I have seen the development of critical thinking, inquiry and love of learning'. They created a large mural around the salmon. Another parent commented,

They did art around salmon and they learned so much about salmon. It was so integrated-they wrote, they thought, they measured. What a beautiful, holistic thing. This was an incredible year and the kids did the salmon dance at the end of the year.

In the spring the salmon were released into the river and students from both Equinox and Roden participated. There is a film documentary of the salmon run. Part of the experience also included a silent, meditative walk. The teacher commented that students in their written reflections on the whole project commented on the power of the silent walk.

Another example of integrated unit was a project on puberty, which can often be a challenging subject to teach. After the basic information was presented, the students were broken into groups. They imagined about coming to earth and making a presentation about how reproduction occurs. They also created a board game. The teacher commented, 'It handled the material in a humorous, non threatening way. For example, a wet dream was two steps back'. Another teacher came in and talked about the menstrual cycle in way that even engaged the boys. The teacher commented that the whole unit was about 'honoring life as whole life. It was a physical and spiritual thing. It bonded the class'.

One of the graduates who is now in high school commented on the impact of the integrated/inquiry-based approach. 'They found interesting ways to teach us...This really got the information into your brain and stay there. Rather than forgetting it in two days. I liked the focus on the arts'. This student also commented on the value of the salmon project.

Mind/body connections

All the teachers I spoke to use meditation with their students. One teacher describes his approach that also includes yoga:

We do two meditations a day. Each day one child leads the class. I introduce it but then they lead the meditations. I give them a time frame for example one minute and see how it goes. I give them something to focus on- a sound, or the breath then they start to run the meditations. They look forward to it. It is a great segway into calming and focusing when coming in from outside.

Another teacher relatively new to Equinox also uses meditation. She gave them choices and one group really engaged the practice.

I did have a small group that were really into meditation. They liked stillness. It really worked for them. When you hear a child talking about stillness it is really amazing or hearing them asking for meditation. It is quite rewarding.

One of the teachers is an experienced mindfulness practitioner. He describes how he has used this practice with the students.

We start with meditation and do mindful movements outside. We try to do noble silence. Coming in after lunch we do one minute. I also incorporate it into the health curriculum. We will lie on the ground for about ten minutes. I also use it for being attentive, mindful listening.

One of the students suffered from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). He and his parents commented that the mindfulness was helpful to him and lowered his stress level. The father said 'It was wonderful. His OCD improved a lot'. Another parent said this about the meditation in another teacher's class, 'They meditated four times a day. The kids love it. I saw one class and the boys were sitting quietly. I couldn't believe it'.

Finally, being outdoors a lot allows the students to move a lot. Several students appreciated the freedom to move about in nature. One graduate said, 'I liked being outside. I cannot sit still for too long'.

Soul/spirit connections

Both nature and the arts nurture the soul. The school holds a play every year. For several years they did *Mid Summers Night Dream*. The older students performed *Macbeth*. Two teachers talked about how two students grew through the experience of being in the play.

In primary we have done *Mid Summers Night Dream* for five years. Also we did musical for junior level. We created a safe environment so it was not about who got the main part. Saw real growth in students. One girl wanted to perform a particular role and at first I could not see her in that role. She was special ed., ADD. She struggled with memory. She blew me away. She put her heart and soul into it.

One parent commented on how scenes were taken from the plays and then woven into math and other parts of the curriculum.

Some of the meditative activities also have a soulful quality:

At holiday time we had parents come too and we did a meditation around eating brown rice. We set up an altar with the rice on it. People reflected on the experience and were finding the world in their little rice. The bonding that happened was amazing. A transpersonal experience. We were connected. The kids and I know that we have been together in a special way. For 20-30 minutes there was silence.

Throughout the interviews the theme of respect arose. Teachers' respect for students and students' respect for teachers and adults. One parent with a daughter who graduated commented:

Another thing is how accepting of her generation is of my generation. It is counter to the idea that teenagers hate their parents. Her friends say 'hi' to me and hug me. When I would go to the school and half the class would see me and say 'Hi, Janet'(pseudonym) I do not think that behavior is common. It should be normal but it is not common. I felt honored to be part of that.

One graduate of Equinox said, 'I felt the school helped parents give more respect to kids'.

Students from different backgrounds respect each other. A parent described how this respect could happen because of doing things together outdoors.

I saw one boy who was known as bully in his previous school working with a girl. She was an artistic, creative person who had been bullied in her previous school. She was teaching him about knot tying and I saw all those barriers and labels falling away. How would they have interacted in typical classroom setting? It is outside and they feel less exposed. I also saw kids working cooperatively on projects together. It seemed to happen so organically. It was amazing.

Several *teachers* commented on how much they value being at Equinox. The way they talk about the school has as soulful quality. Here are some comments.

I come to school everyday so fortunate and grateful that I am here. I really love it here. I feel valued and respected by the kids. There is such a love affair. Parents are fantastic, so amazing. Who would not want to come to a place where you are valued? It is absolutely a great fit and I am proud to be here. How you are with kids reflects you wanting to be here.

Authenticity you see in the kids. Acceptance of who the students are. Students are honored for who they are. Kids really feel at home. They want to be there. It comes from how kids are spoken too. It is a homey, safe place.

One of the newer teachers said, 'I love it here. I want to stay!'

Parents' comments also have this quality:

One parent whose expertise is make-up said this.

I am blown away by what is happening in the school. At the end of school in June we were worried about not being able to see other parents and members of the community. Bigger picture is lost for two months, which is provided by the school. You feel like you are contributing more to life than just raising two kids. With my mother we do a lot art work in the school. I connected with one teacher, who wants to give kids survival skills. I am now interested in permaculture; we built a native garden. My biggest dream is to create a food forest on the school grounds. This includes Roden as well. This activity would be woven into the curriculum. I am so optimistic about this coming year because I contribute more than being a make up artist. It has been beautiful. Just amazing.

Another parent said,

I like how passionate the kids are about learning there and how engaged they are. They like school. I drop her off in the morning and the kids are in the morning circle and I see smiling faces which you do not see everywhere. That is really amazing. I like that all the teachers know my daughter's name and that they are all working together on a common project. I love that. I think it is beautiful.

One parent commented on couple of things that teachers did that touched her.

When daughter started the year the teacher sent all the children a post card and at the end she sent my daughter a lovely letter. I was touched both times. When my daughter graduated from grade 8 (13 students) each student received a special award acknowledging what they contributed. Very different from another school.

Assessment

The teachers use a variety of student assessment techniques. One teacher said;

I try to use a wide variety. I will use portfolios this year, which show the journey of their learning. How do I make a music portfolio? It is a challenge. How do you document active learning? I co-create rubrics with the kids. I also use checklists and observation. They do research projects and present. They then teach what they have learned. Kids then evaluate themselves and make

it clear to the rest of the class. I do give tests. Some parents now want the tests. Kids love spelling tests. Some kids thrive on that and their confidence can build on that.

In reporting to the parents there are interviews. There are two report cards. In one the marks are whited out. The parent can decide which one to share with their child. Parents also have the choice of having their children participating in the testing from the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). Many choose not to participate.

Equity

Teachers commented the issue of equity at the school.

Equity issues are addressed every day. We celebrate our differences. It is integrated into everything we do. You can hear it in the way kids talk to each other.

As an ethnic minority I feel incredibly valued. The whole staff works together and make decisions by consensus. I am also a religious minority but have been able make presentations about my religion to both schools.

Through teaching we address these issues. Going to a soup kitchen. Regarding gender and sexual orientation we are miles ahead of other schools. The way students dress is not an issue here. Students themselves will point out sexist, or discriminatory language.

We are very inclusive here. We have many kinds of families. Nuclear families, then four moms raising one child, two moms and two dads raising a family. Two dads and one mom. We kids are not fixed on their gender, sort of gender questioning. We had one child who came to school; boy dressed in pink, in a dress. Mother asked me if that was OK. I said as long as it was the kid's choice. It is his journey.

Equity is more of an issue now. P.i.n.e. project that we have has a big cost. Larger community wants it but some parents do not have the funds to support it. Some families who struggle financially do not have the time to help while some parents who have time can be stronger advocates for what they want in the school. We need to be aware that we are privileged and how this impacts everything we do. We may have to actively go into other communities that are more diverse to recruit students. That is a challenge that requires time and energy which is so limited.

One parent, a visible minority, commented that her child never experienced any discrimination from the teachers or the students in the five years she was at Equinox. Still she wished there was more diversity in the staff and student body.

Successes/challenges

Several of the successes have already been discussed in previous sections. For example, both staff and parents believe the school is meeting its expectations in delivering holistic education. The strong sense of community is another identified achievement. The curriculum with its focus on the six connections with outstanding work around the earth connections and integrated curriculum is another positive area. The principal saw several areas of achievement:

How we meet the unique needs of the kids. I see kids who come from other schools where things have not worked and I see how parents are very relieved to see what happens to their child. Their children want to be here. I see successes in the kids. They are happy. I sees successes in the parents in seeing what is happening to their kids. The staff have more freedom and support to do the things that they want. Another success is being able to be an advocate for other alternative schools who serve students with special needs, e.g. funding. I have seen successes province

wide because we have had a number of schools from other parts of Ontario show interest and come to visit. They are interested in the outdoor focus as well as the philosophy of the school.

He also commented how the holistic ideas are being adopted in other schools including Roden. Some of these aspects that he has seen adopted in other schools include:

- Relationship building activities similar to our morning circles.
- Mindfulness activities such as meditation, breathing exercises, yoga.
- Getting out into nature and bringing it into the classroom more.
- Using the arts specifically to nurture a student's spirit/soul.
- Focus on classmates as a family to support one another.

One teacher said, 'The authenticity you see in the kids. Acceptance of who the students are. Students are honored for who they are'. Another teacher commented that 'what we have done within the mandate of holistic education has been an accomplishment'.

Several teachers talked about how kids came from other school environments and were troubled and then began to thrive at Equinox. For example, one teacher talked about three kids that lacked communication and social skills. They reacted physically to events. Once they left the school grounds during the day. She says she has seen 'huge growth', as now they help other children and assume leadership roles.

Two other teachers said:

We have some kids who have experienced a lot of anxiety in other schools so we work with them to build relationships. I had three boys last year who were very anxious in the beginning but after a month or two they look forward to coming to school and felt comfortable.

One girl I have been working with since Grade 2. She was very withdrawn, crawling under tables. Now she is more outgoing gives me a hug when she sees me. She takes on more leadership, has more confidence. She is such a delight. I can give her responsibility and she rises to that now. That is a pleasure to see.

Parents also commented on how Equinox provided an environment for their children's growth.

It was an *incubator* where they could mature at their own rate. So much emphasis on conflict resolution, experiencing the difference of others, and accepting others. Kids could grow up without experiencing the pressures in other schools that I hear about. Gaining the core sense of self is so important as you are gaining independence and going out into the world. Going into high school and not needing to be 'cool'. All of her friends from Equinox are really different from each other but they all connect with each other and accept each other as being different. It is lovely.

As mentioned previously, I interviewed four graduates from Equinox. All were articulate and described how the school had helped them develop as persons. One girl said it helped her become more self-confident. Another graduate talked about how it helped him learn 'street smarts and how to live'. Also he could be comfortable being different. He put it this way, 'What I learned is weird is good. You learn it is OK to be different. You build our own platform as an individual and Equinox helps you do that'.

At least two parents commented that their children are not texting all the time or spending lots of time watching TV or spending time on the computer.

Challenges

The challenges that were identified by both teachers and parents included:

- Turnover in staff and hiring several Long-Term Occasional Teachers (LTOs). Some of these teachers lacked experience and understanding of holistic education.
- Need for mentoring of new teachers. There is not enough time for the experienced teachers to mentor LTOs and new staff. One teacher commented that

teachers who are hired at the school should be trained or have experience in holistic education. It would be great if the board had a policy around hiring teachers at a holistic school. I think comments about teachers who taught at the school but didn't follow the holistic approach and the disappointment amongst the parents and children.

- Principal is head of two schools limiting the time he can give to Equinox. One teacher said,

A principal with a background in holistic education would be ideal for the school. The principal we have now supports what we do but what happens if and when we get a principal who doesn't support our holistic approach. The leadership and the teachers are key to the overall success of the school and the delivery of the holistic curriculum.

- The building which was built in the late 1960s. One teacher said this,

Building we are in. We try to foster love for nature but windows do not open. It can feel like a prison. Open concept is a nightmare because of the distractions. Hard to keep kids focused. Roof leaks. Furnace breaks down.

- Small group of parents who are very demanding. One teacher said,

Burnout comes from high maintenance parents. It is exhausting. Most are incredible and lovely and see them twice a day and chatting with them at the end of the day. But there are few that demand so much.

- Lack of diversity in the student population. One teacher said,

We have a pretty white school. We tried to be affirmative but board ignored us.

As mentioned above, the problem of being a mostly white school is partially ameliorated by being housed in Roden which has more diverse population, so there is an opportunity for students from Equinox to interact with Roden students at lunch, recess and some mutually planned events for students from both schools.

Equinox as a model for other schools

Parents were asked if they felt Equinox can be a model for other schools. They all agreed it had much to offer to other schools. Some of the responses included:

Yes, other schools should be built on the Equinox model. Absolutely. We are fortunate, privileged to have this experience. Students who have graduated and we see how well how they are doing. Learning how to learn rather than memorizing. People are hungry for change. My role was outreach and I spoke to many people. I have seen interest from many groups.

Another parent whose daughter is now in high school said,

I believe that other schools should be based on the holistic model. What I have seen in the kids that come through that program. They are not texting all the time and do not have the problems that I hear about kids in other schools.

Another parent commented, 'We need to think about what can be adapted from holistic education to other spaces. Challenge because some environments are very rigid. We need to look at kids in a more holistic way'.

Finally, one parent observed, 'Other schools should follow this model. To be able to want to learn, to engage the world. These skills are so essential. Caring about other people. In other schools it is about the individual!'

Conclusion

I was inspired by the interviews I conducted with the teachers, parents and students. The enthusiasm around the school is contagious. Some of the words that stand out include 'authenticity', 'community', 'respect', 'honoring one another' and 'love'. Despite some challenges, all the teachers love working at the school. One parent's comment was representative of all the parents I interviewed, 'I am extremely happy the school came into our lives. I am so thankful for it. I have seen the result in my children'. The students also expressed their love for the school. The biggest challenges for the school include working within the constraints of the system, which include having one principal who is in charge of two schools. Another challenge is creating a more diverse community of students and teachers.

We live in the day of outcomes-based education, but often these outcomes are limited to a few skills that sometimes are put within the framework of being 'marketable'. Equinox shows that education can be more than this. It strives to reach the whole person-head, hands and heart. As one graduate said the learning there 'stuck in her brain' and also reached her 'whole body'. Another graduate said, 'you build your own platform as an individual'. At the same time the students learned to care for one another. One parent commented about the 'amount of compassion and empathy' she saw in the students. The school has grown and matured over the seven years. There now seems to be a stable core staff that can carry the school forward. As the principal mentioned, other schools in Ontario are showing interest in Equinox and there is a woman in Spain who would like to develop a similar school on the island of Ibiza. Ultimately, education needs to be about developing whole human beings. Equinox has made giant strides towards achieving this form of education.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

John P. Miller has been working in the field of holistic education for over 40 years. He is author/editor of 18 books on holistic learning and contemplative practices in education which include *Whole Child Education*, *The Holistic Curriculum*, *The Contemplative Practitioner*, and most recently *Teaching from the Thinking Heart: The Practice of Holistic Education*. His writing has been translated into nine languages. *The Holistic Curriculum* has provided the programme framework for the Equinox Holistic Alternative

School in Toronto where Jack has been involved in an advisory role. Jack has worked extensively with holistic educators in Japan, Korea and Hong Kong for the past 20 years and has been a visiting professor at universities in Japan and Hong Kong. In 2009, Jack was one of 24 educators invited to Bhutan to help that country develop their educational system so that it supports the country's goal of Gross National Happiness. Jack teaches courses on holistic education and contemplative education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto where he is a professor.

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