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Educating the Whole Child: The Real Story of Wholeness and Belonging

By Stephanie Pace Marshall

A Personal Context

For as long as I can remember I have loved words, coming to believe at a young age that “a word was worth a thousand pictures” and each of its nuanced meanings part of a dazzling linguistic kaleidoscope of images and patterns of possibility. I learned that words have profound power.

So I began creating my own linguistic palette, mindful of the narratives and the “thousand pictures” I hoped my words might evoke. Later, as I sought to tell a whole new story of learning and schooling—a generative and life-affirming story—I chose the words I believed might inspire and breathe life into its imagining and its emergence.

As educators, we each bring unique understandings to the concept of the *whole child* and the conditions essential for their nurturance and development—health, safety, engagement, support and challenge (ASCD Whole Child Report).

But what does “whole” really mean, and do its multiple meanings deepen our understanding of the work required of us now, to lead in creating conditions that ensure the development of whole children, including whole schools and communities?

Most definitions do not surprise us. “Whole” means “complete and not divided.” But one took my breath away. “Whole” also means “not wounded, injured, or impaired.”¹

1 *American Heritage Dictionary*

Wholeness, by Design

When we commit to educating the whole child, we commit to creating learning environments by design that ignite and nurture the totality of each child’s multiple potentials; engage all the ways children come to know, experience and

make sense of their world; invite and honor the power of their minds, and the power of their hearts, bodies, souls and spirits in learning; and integrate all the domains of knowledge—mathematics, science, wellness, the arts and humanities—into a coherent, connected, dynamic and unified whole.

But most importantly, educating whole children

means that we commit to educating them into *wholeness*.

Why is this so fundamental? Because the fearful world children now see, the reductive learning story they now live, the incoherent learning map they now follow, and the siloed learning landscape they now walk is fragmented, fractured and alien to who they really are—injuring their imagination, impairing their creativity and wounding their capacity for exploration, discovery, and wise world-shaping.

This reductive and splintered story is not the real one. The *real* story of learning is generative and life-affirming; and it is the only one that will reconnect our children to the wholeness and enable them to embrace all of who they are.

To capture this real story in the language of poetic imagination, and to invite you to create “a thousand pictures,” I wrote a poem for us and our children.



Illustrator: Morgan Blair

The Real Story

*It happens imperceptively
So silently
So slowly
We cannot know the time
Nor place*

*We cannot name the day
Nor moment
We cannot tell when
We came to know
That to become ourselves
We had to hide ourselves*

*We had to protect our souls
Sequester our spirits
And learn to doubt our gifts and
What we knew we
Really loved*

*We are not born alone, empty or lost
We are born into the vibrant web of life
Open to wonder, creativity, and
The abundant possibilities of life and learning*

*Breathing in the joy of exploration and discovery
Singing with the wind
Dancing with the trees
Blossoming with the first buds of spring
We did not know
What we could not, or should not,
Do or be*

*We were free to play
To wonder
To try out all of whom we might become*

*Buoyed by our own imagination
And embraced by a palpable
Yet transcendent field of connections
And belonging--
So big it took our breath away*

*But slowly
New and older voices began to tell
A different story
Began to ask us to live
A different story*

*They told us that wonder,
Awe and imagination were only
For the young*

*That we would outgrow them
That the World they called real
Would soon teach us
To change our minds about
Everything*

*About the joy of exploration and discovery
About singing with the wind
About dancing with the trees
About blossoming with the first buds of spring
About belonging to the World,
Ourselves and one another*

*And gradually,
Just as they said we would,
We became the story they told us
The wind still embraced us,
But we had no time for singing
The trees still danced,
But we dared not join them
And the first blossoms of spring emerged
Without us becoming part of their flowering*

*But as gradually
As we had become lost,
We were reinvited into the World our
Hearts,
Souls, and
Spirits had always known was
Truly real*

*A new story was being told
A story of meaning and mystery
Of wholeness and wonder
Of imagination and connections
Of life and learning*

*And it was living this story that
Returned me
To who I am*

*It was living this story that reconnected me to
The natural World,
To the song of the wind
To the dance of the trees
To the flowering of the first buds of spring*

*It was living this story that returned
Me to myself*

And told me that I am not alone, empty, or lost

*It was living this story that brought me
Back to life and told me*

I belong.

It is this real story of meaning, connections, wholeness and belonging that our children so desperately need now. Wholeness cannot be nurtured in siloed, fragmented, joyless or wounding environments.

Our children are untethered, awe-deprived, and unaware of what marvels they are because the current story—the very unreal story of learning—has schooled them away from their genius.

As leaders, storytellers and mapmakers, we must ensure that the story, map, and landscape of schooling does not constrain our children's potentials, silence their spirit, demean their passion, ridicule their dreams, or deny them access to wisely learn whatever it is that they want to know.

We must tell our children The Real Story of Wholeness and Belonging and invite them to walk its path. It is this story that will bring them to life.

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