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

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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—wounding 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.

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 American Heritage Dictionary
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.

Stephanie Pace Marshall, Ph.D. is the Founding President and President Emerita of the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy. She was President of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and founding President of the National Consortium of Specialized Secondary Schools in Mathematics, Science and Technology. Her book, The Power to Transform: Leadership That Brings Learning and Schooling to Life, received the 2007 Educator’s Award from The Delta Kappa Gamma Society International. Dr. Marshall is a member of the Clinton Global Initiative, a non-partisan cadre of “the world’s most influential leaders committed to strengthening the capacity of people throughout the world to meet the challenges of global interdependence.” Readers can hear Dr. Marshall speak at the Northeast Affiliate ASCD Conference in Boston on December 4 – 6; see www.mascd.org for further details. Visit her at: http://www.stephaniepacemarshall.com/

Listen to a podcast of Dr. Marshall reading her poem at www.mascd.org!