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A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO EDUCATION

THE EXPLORATIVE JOURNEY INTO THE PRACTISES AND BELIEFS OF ONE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SCHOOL

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Abstract

Holistic Education (HolEd) offers exciting prospects for the future of education, moving away from a fragmented worldview held by the forces of the market and the demands of technology, to a connected one. It aims to foster an education that takes into account the multidimensionality of human beings, while acknowledging the interconnected nature of experience. The purpose of this qualitative research, utilising an ethnographic case study, is to investigate into the field of HolEd and explore, when its principles are brought to life, how it might constitute a good education (Biesta, 2009) for the twenty-first century student. Threaded throughout this research are Gert Biesta's theoretical perspectives, that provide a critical, global and contemporary outlook on the topic.

My research initially reveals the varied nature of HolEd in and of itself, encompassing a wide range of interpretation for its pedagogical application. A collection of theoretical sources was outlined to imagine how holistic approaches might materialise, depending on their context, within a Westernised educational scene. This empirical research then, illustrates and responds to one expression of HolEd in a twenty-first century school by illuminating the practical aspects of the school's motto: 'Know-thyself'. Through a Biestan perspective, this study engages in a critical conversation on the wider aims and means of education, raising questions on holistic methods when applied in an instrumental way. It concludes by recognising, that when an on-going dialogue between holistic practises and its proponents transpires, HolEd may become a site for students to find their place with and in the world.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

This research explores how a holistic approach to education shapes educational practises and the learning experience; and considers how holistic education (HolEd) might shape students, and their futures, beyond the school environment. Pre-dating this work, however, is a deceptively simple, and far broader question:

What could constitute good education for our highly diverse and accelerated world?

This inquiry stems from a personal and ethical starting point: concern for the prospects of future generations living and learning on this planet, who face ever-increasing hardships. It began with a popular rhetoric in mind: one that predicates the need for transformation of our educational systems against a high-paced world caught in the flux of ever-changing and outdated knowledge. My research continued in these terms. I started to inquire into alternative education from those mainstream modes charged with failing the needs of its twenty-first century students. Along the way I came across the field of HolEd that appeared to offer exciting possibilities for the future of education and with principles which echoed my sense of what a good education could be. HolEd advocates for an educational experience that is emancipating, rather than limiting, embracing the whole human experience in and through the relationships which sustain it. Its ultimate purpose is to transform the way individuals perceive themselves and their relationship with the world; moving from a fragmented perspective to an integrative one (Clark, 1991). Further research then directed me to the work of Gert Biesta, an educator and philosopher who raises the idea of school as a place of slowing down rather than matching the speed of society (Biesta, 2015). The rhetoric I initially had in mind was dismantled quite abruptly. I realised that education was not about preparing young minds to the future; rather, it *is* a site for students to relate to the past and situate themselves in the present, and offers keys towards the future.

Representing a field in which students engage in learning not only with their minds, but with their entire being, HolEd presents an exciting site to explore the myriad of influences outlined above, and from which to examine the following aims of this work:

Obj. 1. An investigation into the concept of HolEd and the ways in which it may shape student learning and educational practises, and social relationships beyond the school setting;

Obj. 2. An in depth look at the practise of HolEd in one case study site;

Obj. 3. A consideration of how the idea of HolEd, coloured by its practise within the case study site, may shape students as individuals, and their role within society more broadly.

There are gaps to fill in this regard. Whilst theoretical perspectives of HolEd have been extensively researched (see refs), Desouza (2003) cautions that little has been written about the practises of HolEd 'in the real world in schools' and how schools that view themselves as holistic actually implement its principles and values in their daily practises (p.xiii). Others argue that in spite of an increasing number of schools integrating holistic approaches in their education, empirical research of such cases remains limited (see Rudge, 2008). Thus, a clear gap prevails between theoretical understandings and practical applications. Furthermore, research previously conducted on holistic schools was largely done by scholars convinced by the field (e.g. Yihong, 2002; Adams, 2006).

My research responds to these deficits by creating conceptual bridges between holistic philosophy and pedagogy, and contemporary academic discourses, and by critically exploring holistic practises for education through an ethnographic case study approach of a twenty-first century holistic school, a small-sized, safe and a green haven, located at the heart of one of the fastest growing cities of the world. This research has proved that once HolEd is put in practise within the complex, multi-layered environment that we call education, its principles are far from being left untouched.

The dissertation proceeds to write about this work as follows: Chapters 2 and 3 explore the literature, first in relation to knowledge and understandings of HolEd, and second, through a broad depiction of the contemporary educational scene which contextualises it. Chapter 4 details my methodological approach. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss my findings using a narrative ethnographic style. Following Chapter 6, and preceding my conclusion, an interlude shares thought on my experience of doing this work that are otherwise uncontained in the main text.

Chapter 2. Literature review

Introduction

Taking my orientation from the first of my aims as outlined in my introduction:

1. An investigation into the concept of HolEd and the ways in which it may shape student learning and educational practises, and social relationships beyond the school setting;

This literature review is formed over two chapters. This chapter provides an overview of the theoretical foundations of HolEd followed by its main philosophical and theoretical perspectives. The work of J.P. Miller, one of the main proponents of the movement, has significantly contributed to my understanding of the field.

Going through the literature to detangle and extract main components of the multiple views the field entails proved to be a lengthy process. I gradually realised that there is no single or definitive approach to what constitutes HolEd. That said, although a working definition remains absent, a range of recurring principles, concepts, and ideas can be found (see Hare, 2006; Rudge, 2008). Detailing all the themes holistic educators defend is out of the scope of this study. Yet, for the purpose of this research, I selected and synthesised key concepts to frame my discussion, keeping in mind that multiple features overlap – which is expected as these notions are interrelated.

Theoretical foundations of the movement

HolEd as a recognisable and practised field of study was born in the 1980s in North America when the term 'holistic' was explicitly applied to 'education' (e.g. Miller, 1988; R. Miller, 1990; Palmer, 1998). The field, still a largely Western phenomenon (Taggart, 2001), partakes in the alternative educational movement and surfaced as an attempt to confront educational gaps around the world, proposing a model that acknowledges individual plurality within an interdependent community (Clark, 1991).

Principles of the field can be been traced back to the influences of 18th and 19th century humanistic educators; the most cited in the literature are Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Froebel. (e.g. Miller, 1988; R. Miller, 1992; Forbes, 1996). Followed by 19th and 20th century educationalists (principally Montessori and Steiner), they focused on a child-centered approach, highlighted

the spiritual nature of all individuals, and recognised children to be in need of more than an intellectual development. Alongside the ideals of humanistic thinkers, HolEd borrows concepts from progressive educators (e.g. Dewey and Freire), social critics (e.g. Goodman, Friedengerb and Horton) and radical critics (e.g. Holt, Kozol and Illich). Feminist thoughts also significantly contributed to the field, actively advocating for the value of care and happiness (Noddings, 1992, 2003), the virtue of love (hooks, 2000) and pleasure in the classroom (hooks, 1994). Additionally, Nakagawa (2000) explored various philosophical foundations of HolEd that stem from Eastern perspectives, such as Buddhist, Confucian and, Islamic philosophies.

In the last decades, 'holistic' became a fashionable term, used in many fields, such as health, business, science, nutrition and education (Brooks, 2006). An increasing number of schools, universities and organisations have adopted the latter term in their approach and many educators identify themselves as holistic practitioners (Rudge, 2016). Several publications have recently been published, such as the 3rd edition of *The Holistic Curriculum* (2019) and *The International Handbook of Holistic Education* (2018) with contributions of eastern and western holistic educators. Moreover, numerous important conferences have taken place recently, that which signals a growing interest in the field.

However, due to the merging of a wide range of philosophical and pedagogical orientations (Forbes, 2003), the historical and theoretical grounds of the movement remain quite elusive to many professionals (Rudge, 2016). The lack of a common definition has resulted in uncertainties regarding to its practises delaying the delivery of its key elements (Hare, 2006). Miller (1990) upholds that HolEd 'should not be defined as a particular method or technique; it is mostly seen as paradigm, a set of basic assumptions and principles that can be applied in diverse ways' (p.5); hence, it should remain a diverse and all-encompassing movement, free from any specific faith (Rudge, 2008). It also needs to be interpreted within a particular social and cultural context and cannot be implemented mechanically and identically throughout all educational systems (Lee *et al*., 2014).

Theoretical perspectives

Human wholeness

The concept of wholeness is at the heart of a holistic educational process. HolEd embraces a 'person-centered perspective, concerned with the fullest development of authentic personhood'

(R. Miller, 1992, p.6), yet it distanced itself from an individualistic focus whereby growth is perceived as irrefutably good (Taggart, 2001). Committed to educate the whole student, it recognises individuals as multidimensional, functioning simultaneously on several interrelated levels – the mental intelligences, physical, emotional, social, aesthetic, sensual, and spiritual (e.g. Miller, 2007, 2010). An underlying rationale for a whole education is that when all facets of human experience are addressed, inner-balance is cultivated. However, if parts of the self are neglected, disharmony dominates leading to stress and illnesses (Brooks, 2006). Therefore, excessive focus on facts, science, and skills that only features certain dimensions of human reality, but ignore others, is widely reprimanded. HolEd blame an education that reduces students to a set of learning competencies or thinking skills, whose learning are disembodied and disconnected from their life (e.g. Miller, 2010; Miller *et al*., 2014). Holistic educators call for an education that nurtures human aspects integrally and equally; an education that begins with children's living reality, that which requires a broad approach.

Interconnectedness

HolEd recognises multiple levels of wholeness, hence, the whole person is inherently rooted in larger contexts of meanings; 'family, community, subculture, social order, biosphere and universe' (R. Miller, 1992, p.6). The wholeness of individuals can be appreciated in the interconnectedness through the relationships which sustain it (e.g. Miller, 2007). The quality of these relationships where meaning is made and awareness manifests is a common notion across the field. Selby (2002) writes about a 'radical interconnectedness', whereby everything is in constant change, and thus, to acknowledge the importance of the inner-journey and how this journey is closely linked to the outside world is essential. Indeed, nature, animals, people, objects, ideas, actions and feelings are viewed as interdependent entities. To-appreciate these connections one has to feel the inherent value to each and every form, which demands reverence for all life. Therefore, a feeling of kinship and responsibility towards the community and the earth may express itself (e.g. Buber, 1958; Hare, 2006). To match this principle, holistic curriculums integrate various domains of knowledge, acknowledging that learning is a complex interaction between person and environment (see *The Holistic Curriculum: a practical approach,* p.8).

Democratic & caring communities

Holistic educators reject the idea of authoritarian systems ruled by economic, social, or cultural power (e.g. Eisler, 2000; Miller, 2000). They advocate for 'participatory democracy' in which conscious individuals participate meaningfully in the community, in society, and for the planet (Education 2000, 2000, p.164) and value an education based on fairness, openness and democratic relationships (Eisler & Miller, 2004).

A caring community starts in the classroom (e.g. Noddings, 1992). Care is perceived as foundational for learning, social life, and social justice (Forbes, 2003). Classrooms are thus modelled as just, reflective and kind-hearted micro-societies; spaces in which teachers respond to students with openness, curiosity, love, and sensitivity where the sense of fear is removed. Accordingly, the school environment fosters wholeness in its community, one that cultivates these values and promotes diversity and plurality (e.g. Miller, 2007; 2010). Students who recognise the importance of community build healthier relationships and appreciate differing viewpoints (Hare, 2006). Moreover, with the rise of individualism, this sense of belonging is perceived as antidote to the onslaught of the twenty-first century within which many young people experience a loss of meaning and purpose (De Souza, 2003).

Freedom/autonomy

Alongside democratic principles, the theme of freedom/autonomy has been integrated in HolEd, generally referred as 'inner-freedom, freedom of mind and expression, and freedom of action' (Rudge, 2016, p.172). In that sense, the school milieu encourages freedom of choice and autonomy in the learning (e.g. Education 2000, 2000; Nakagawa, 2000; Forbes, 2003). Taggart (2001) argues that although most holistic schools are situated in safe havens, freedom is not perceived as the unique celebration of individual self-sufficiency but is described as a means for individual empowerment within various forms of community, social and global.

Spirituality

Spirituality is the defining feature of HolEd. Its philosophy is located within worldviews that value oneness, wholeness, and interconnectedness (e.g. Miller, 2000, 2006; Nakagawa, 2000). Despite the wide range of definition, spirituality is commonly described as a level of connectedness that an individual feel towards themselves, the world around them, and to a 'Transcendent Other' (De Souza, 2003). In HolEd, all individuals are recognised as inherently

spiritual endowed to a natural capacity for spiritual and moral growth. A spiritual sensibility is viewed as remedy to counter the effects of a society entrenched to scientific-materialistic worldviews borne to consumerist ideals (Miller, 2019). In discussing spirituality that should characterise HolEd, R. Miller (1999) supports that:

> 'This spirituality should not be taken as an utterly mystical or otherworldly spirituality... It makes no sense then to have spirituality without democracy; without social justice; without the healing of hatred and racial and class oppression; without a sustainable and nourishing relationship to the biosphere.' (p.195)

In that sense, this dimension is not considered as add-on to the educational experience but is intrinsically embedded to it (Lewis, 2000; Taggart, 2001; Ergas, 2011). Taggart (2001) further stresses that with its emphasis on relationships, HolEd promotes a 'civic consciousness' (p.332), inclined to foster a wider consciousness transmitted through spiritual and cultural values, conveyed most powerfully by storytelling and the arts.

The quest to self-knowledge

Consequently, such education aspires to educate for a different quality of person (Morin, 2001) that calls forth a deep-rooted respect for life and love of learning. Students who receive a HolEd during the first eighteen years of their life are presumed to mature into active, participatory, autonomous, and creative individuals; ones that are capable of developing qualities that support their growth, aware of how their strengths may benefit them, others and the earth, contributing to an overall sense of harmony reflecting onto their surroundings (Hare, 2006). Thus, their entree to adult life is anchored in a powerful sense of self in relation with others.

In that sense, the quest of self-discovery – heart of Krishnamurti's (1953, 1974) educational philosophy – is key to a holistic development (Nakagawa, 2000). Krishnamurti affirms that to understand life is to understand the self; a journey that may be sustained only within a balanced curriculum that touches all human aspects. To guide students to develop wholeness, educators are invited to observe their own limitations and devote themselves to self-awareness, as the way they look inwards reflect how they see outwards. Furthermore, Ergas (2011) believes that an inner-journey punctuated by existential questions is crucial in an educational setting as 'only constant contemplation of these enigmas can lead to education leading to a better society' (p.175).

The Holistic Curriculum: a practical approach

Miller (1988; 2007; 2019) provides a foundational look for a holistic curriculum exemplifying how holistic principles may be inquired and practised in the classroom. He defines three overarching principles: connectedness, inclusion and balance.

'Connectedness' refers to an education that fosters connections at every level of learning and rejects an education that breaks down knowledge into courses, units, lessons, and competence-based formats. He stipulates that how students learn is as important as what they learn. 'Inclusion' encourages a wide range of methods to reach a diversified student population. Six relationships are highlighted: analytical/linear and intuitive thinking, the use of the body, space and mind, the linkage between subjects, connections to the community, to the natural world, and to the soul/inner-self. Within this second principle, Miller proposes three educational orientations, used interchangeably when appropriate to create a natural flow in the classroom: 'transmission' (the unidirectional transfer of information from teacher to student), 'transaction' (students are problem-solvers who learn through inquiry and teacher-students' interaction is mutual), and 'transformation' (practises that cultivate students' inner-lives and engage in processes of self-discovery and transformation). Finally, 'balance' seeks to establish harmonious relationships between yang energies (rational thinking, content mastery, and standardised testing) and yin energies (intuitive thinking, cooperation, process, learning, authentic assessment).

Chapter 3. Holistic Education as a response to twenty-first century life

Introduction

This chapter proceeds with the work of the literature review by looking at important ideas that illustrate a twenty-first century, Westernised educational context. It introduces theorists that do not specifically engage with the field of HolEd, but nonetheless their mode of thinking calls into question the extent to which HolEd can achieve its aims or support it as ways to achieve this. This is important and serves as a theoretical foundation to grasp HolEd within a wider context of twenty-first century educational perspectives, preoccupations and goals.

Browsing the literature, I identified a variety of institutions (e.g. The International Baccalaureate) as fitting more or less within the broader HolEd framework; the latter being inherently influenced and inspired by current educational trends marked by the rebirth of progressive styles of education and child-centered approaches (Priestley & Biesta, 2014), inserted in climate of increasingly pervasive regimes of measurement and latent neoliberal cultures.

The normalised omnipresence of neoliberalism

This section outlines some major problematic accounts of neoliberal tenets, strongly impacting education systems worldwide, which have in turn also legitimated the existence of new educational trends (see *Twenty-first century educational ideals*, p.11)

Since the 1980s, the neoliberal ideology has penetrated through global processes, local contexts in various manners and at different degrees, transforming social, economic, and political systems and structures (Finn *et al*., 2010). Most people are not aware that their lives are pulled by its strings as this system foreshadows nearly all actions and takes infinite ways of how one relates to it (Olmedo, 2018). Schools are not exempt of this invasion. Neoliberal principles have infiltrated schooling systems resulting in an educational agenda largely based on individualism, competition and the free market (e.g. Giroux, 2010, 2017). From a neoliberal perspective, good education has prepared young minds to become free-willed citizens and competitive global actors for employability. And in a consumerist society, a successful citizen generally has the financial backup to buy their freedom.

Critical thinkers have commented in length its influences and consequences on education. Schools are usually blamed to be turned into the defenders and perpetrators of problematic social orders (e.g. Freire 2000; Aronowitz, 2004, 2008) controlled by the rules of multi-national giants indifferent to social, cultural and environmental needs (Giroux 2003). Giroux (2010) compares classrooms to 'dead zones', where critical, self-reflection and imagination are discouraged, and what is left from it, drifts to sites outside of the school mediated by a corporate-driven media culture (p.715). Consequently, 'educational institutions have largely given up 'training people capable of thinking about important political, environmental, economic and social issues of global order' and reflecting and acting on radical alternatives' (Huckle & Wals, 2015 p. 493).

The scarcity of critical discussions around these broad frames of references is what Apple (2009) refers as an 'epistemological fog' (p. 9), which has clouded conceptions of an education that would address the former concerns. He urges schools and teachers to embrace education as a political act, attentive to issues of power, domination, oppression, inequality, and environmental degradation. Along these lines, sustainable educators (e.g. Orr, 2004; Wals, 2017) insist for an education that promotes sustainable ways of living, teaching students how to 'live lightly, equitably, meaningfully and empathically on Earth' (towards the present, the future, different cultures, the non-human and more-than-human world) (Wals, 2017 p.157). Others look towards the future positively supporting transformational pedagogies that reignite a politic of hope, investing in teaching the whole child in a more-than-human world (Wrigley *et al*., 2012).

These critics coexist within a culture of measurement that has increasingly grown in the past two decades, influencing significantly educational spheres from the highest levels of educational policy development down to local teachers' practises (Biesta, 2009; Ravitch, 2010). This measurement culture, in comparing students' academic performances, leads to a 'common sense' view of what matters in education, that is 'academic achievement in a small number of curricular domains' (Biesta, 2009, p.37). Bailey & Cooker (2018) suggests that the obsession on learning outcomes marginalises aspects of education as they cannot be measured in standardised tests. Thus, schools end up measuring what is easily assessable and not what they value, reaching most of the population at arguably shallow levels of knowledge. Moreover, narrowed curriculums make high-stakes testing easier to assess, and in turn promote the message that all students should learn the same things at the same time, which denies diversity

and ‘turn ideas into numbers and the creative impulse into ashes’ (Sardoc & Giroux, 2018, p.101). The measurement culture is then completely detached from students’ reality (Nuthall, 2002).

The current preoccupation with measurement also encourages individuals to think about what they can get out of education, instead of any shared consideration for the public good (MacAllister, 2016). This argument is linked to individual freedom; a key principle celebrated by neoliberal mindsets delaying collective efforts, and argued to obstruct education to play a prominent role in reimagining and transforming ways of seeing humanity and treating others and the planet. A ‘new common sense’ that Giroux (in Sardoc & Giroux, 2018) defines as the ‘freedom to consume, spew out hate and celebrate notions of self-interest and a rabid individualism*’* (p.102).

The quality of such freedom can be considered within ‘the shopping paradigm’ in which economic systems are actively working to the quick and effective fulfilment of people’s desires (Biesta, 2017b). Following Biesta (2013), students are engaged in a process of ‘coming into the world’ (p.141); a liminal phase in which their immature self may be amplified as they are caught in the midst of a consumerist culture, prone to endless desires that situate them at the centre of their world, rather than in and with the world. In his view, education has the difficult task to interrupt, question and challenge a nascent egotism, to guide students beyond themselves to discover their own voice as a voice amongst others; a process that he refers as subjectification (Biesta, 2009)[1]. Therefore, alongside its duty to qualify and socialise individuals, a broader educational question is about guiding students into becoming ‘subject of action and responsibility’ in a diverse and pluralistic world, not only for the market-place but for their lives (Biesta, 2012, p.39).

Twenty-first century educational ideals

This section delineates current orientations in policy circles and amongst educators which have emerged in response to a plurality of narratives. Alongside the rather disheartening portrait of modern education depicted by neoliberal critics, the rhetoric of a fast-paced society leading to rapid changes and uncertain times, led to the idea that education has to be revolutionised (e.g.

[1] Biesta (2009) identifies three functions of education: qualification (which is to impart skills, knowledge, and dispositions), socialisation (which shapes students into the ‘particular social, cultural, and political orders’ that society needs), and subjectification (the process of becoming a subject) (p.39-40).

Dryden & Vos, 2005). However, as recent debates suggest, these contemporary trends in policy and practise do not coexist without tension and raise new challenges (see *Reinventing the Curriculum*, 2013).

What constitute an appropriate education for the twenty-first century and what should be prioritised in curricula and educational provision are questions relentlessly debated and problematised (Stehlik, 2018). Evidently views and responses to these matters differ sharply. Indeed, Yates (2012) reports that ways in which the traditional role of education might pass on and change is still uncertain. 'Traditional' being generally referred to the modernity of last century industrial society opposed to the post-modernity of our digitized era (Stehlink, 2018).

Calls to reconfigure inherited education systems are taking place worldwide as the model in place, created to meet the needs of industrialism, is deemed utterly outdated (e.g. Robinson & Aronica, 2015). Many accuse education systems to be slow organisms in catching up with societal, economic and technological changes (Yates, 2012). Some even declare that 'most schools are teaching students for a world that no longer exist' (Dryden & Vos, 2005, p.91). In *Creative schools*, Robinson & Aronica (2015) present examples to transform the so-called factory model that favours the memorisation of facts rather than the application of learning. Pink (2006) stresses that our new world necessitates a new mind, one in which the artistic and conceptual right brain balances out the ruling power of the analytical left brain. Here an analogy can be drawn with the notion of holism. As mentioned, the basic principle of HolEd is the capacity to understand how everything is interconnected and part of the same whole (Clark, 1991). Similarly, to rely on one part of the brain is insufficient, one must operate with the 'totality of the mind' (Krishnamurti, 1974, p.46) and appreciate how each part interact with each other. In this respect, Damon (2008) suggests that only when students learn to integrate various levels of concepts, meanings, and experiences that support purposeful learning processes, they can apply their efforts meaningfully. He further underlines that although purpose is primarily a personal pursuit, it aspires to contribute beyond self-benefit.

In the wider field of educational research, a common language of tomorrow's citizen has flourished; the latter usually labelled as a self-directed learner that can think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, collaborate, solve problems, innovate, adapt and is computer literate (Stehlink, 2018). The traditional idea of pursuing a linear path (school – higher education – work) is judged inadequate if one wishes to thrive in a fickle environment (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). In fact, the rhetoric of a fast-changing world along with the

changing nature of work invites students to become 'flexible-workers' equipped with skills and competencies transferrable across various work arenas (e.g. communication, collaboration, and creativity) in contrast to specific hard skills (e.g. literacy, numeracy, and content/knowledge) (Stehlink, 2018 p. 259). Wiliam (2011) projects that 'most skills learn when at school will not be applicable in the future...the one really competitive skill is the skill of being able to learn' (p.9). Together with this prediction, a large body of contemporary literature extensively focus on learning, implying that it is what education is fundamentally about (e.g. Hadar & Hotam, 2012). Within this context, 'learning community' became a popular designation for schools (Biesta, 2017a, p.423); a space that inspire collaboration, offer skills for lifelong learning, and which focuses on children's developmental potentials rather than deficits (Tyack and Cuban 1995).

Twenty-first century critics point that these skills are only complementary to a solid foundation of knowledge in order to apply them, and are not necessarily transferrable across domains (Christodoulou, 2014, Hirsch 2009; Ravitch, 2009). Moreover, the renewed interest in Dewey's legacy 'learning-by-doing', privileging students' learning through self-directed/inquiry-based projects, pushes aside the teaching of factual knowledge (Christodoulou, 2014). Yet, as Ravitch (2009) argues 'people do not think in the abstract; they need knowledge – ideas, facts, concepts – to think about' (p.1). These contemporary progressive approaches are also perceived as narrow instrumental arguments based upon economic imperatives in order to prepare a population for the workplace (Yates and Collins, 2010) – as opposed to the transmission of 'powerful knowledge' required to critically engage with the world (Young *et al.* 2014). Whilst admitting education to be very cognitive, Biesta (2017b) also articulates that knowledge-based curriculums remain essential as means to encounter the world and ourselves in relation to the world. Thus, the rhetoric present in policy documents and institutions, pressing students to acquire skills to adapt to a constantly changing world, is a survival way of thinking, implying that competition is a fact of life, not a choice (Biesta, 2015; Yates, 2012).

In this context, writers also suggest education to be articulated in terms of what students should be able *to do and become* and not what they *should know* (Biesta & Priestely, 2014). Accordingly, teachers' role is to assure competencies to be mastered, rather than approaching teaching holistically by reflecting on questions as to what good teaching is. In that respect, normative discussions to Biesta's (e.g. 2009; 2013) leitmotiv: *What constitute a good education?* have been side-tracked by the rise of an educational language centered around

learning, in part due to the renewed interest in constructivists theories of learning and teaching. Biesta (2012) refers to a 'new-student-centered' (p.36) education that promotes 'a shift from teaching to learning' (Barr & Tagg, 1995), whereby students' self-organised learning relegates teachers' position to the side-line of the educational relationship. A problematic situation as it presupposes that teachers have nothing to give to their students (as everything is assumed to be already within them), which in turn downgrades their role to facilitators, closely bypassing questions on the means and aims of education (Biesta, 2013). Additionally, learning directed towards students' satisfaction needs to be enjoyable. This idea associates to the 'shopping paradigm', where educational processes are seen as economic transactions, which in turn influences the way people see education: institutions are shops, students are consumers with needs that teachers-providers cater for (Biesta, 2006; 2017b).

Alongside the concern of accommodating students' desires, the necessity for education to lay a foundation for students' emotional wellbeing, recurrently embracing the notion of whole person, has been widely disseminated amongst education institutions and policy texts (Ecclestone, 2014). Schools should foster healthy and positive environments to engender confident, enthusiastic individuals, readily prepared to face future challenges regardless of the number of qualifications earned (Claxton in Sharples, 2007, p.14). Johnson *et al*. (2007) stress that all aspects of students should be developed, as the new century demands individuals to be socially, emotionally, and morally efficient and capable to express regenerated capacity for doing and making. The authors also raise the idea that not 'all people are intellectuals', and the 'world cannot survive only through thought' (p.27). Other writers declare that outdated subject disciplines are detrimental to students from disadvantage backgrounds, deemed to be insignificant and irrelevant to their real-life contexts or to hinder educational success that may have long-term negative consequences (White, 2007). Ecclestone (2014) insinuates that this increasing focus on wellbeing might hide a broader underlying feeling of confusion about the purposes of education, reflecting its proponents own lack of confidence about how to motivate young people in formal education, and particularly in learning through subject disciplines. A more problematic consequence to the instrumentalisation of a disposition-based curriculum to boost positive educational outcomes, is that it can deviate the attention from structural factors (e.g. material conditions, class, race and gender) by exclusively addressing emotional wellbeing as the leading precursor for outriding disadvantage.

The International Baccalaureate: A twenty-first century holistic illustration

This last section briefly presents some aspects of the International Baccalaureate (IB). It provides context to my case study as its curricular framework includes two IB programmes for Middle and Diploma Years (see www.ibo.org).

The IB proclaim its program to be holistic (e.g. Bunnell, 2011; Bailey & Cooker, 2018), yet a lack of understanding as to its holistic nature remains (Armstrong, 2000). It aims to offer quantifiable academic training for higher education and lifelong learning abilities with the intention to develop students' cultural fluency of a global citizen (Bunnell, 2011). The learning philosophy is influenced by child-centered ideas and curriculums are built upon a holistic, coherent and flexible design. The programmes are based on a constructivist pedagogy (Nashman-Smith & Taylor, 2004), advocating for inquiry-based pedagogical frameworks and concept-based methods (Dickson *et al*., 2018). The IB learners' profile encompasses a set of ten capabilities detailed with what learners should be able to do and their desired outcomes. Finally, its mission statement echoes HolEd ideals as it aims to develop internationally-minded people appreciating their common humanity and shared responsibility to create a more peaceful world.

The IB is criticised to serve the interests of a transnational elite in numerous ways. Scholars argue that the promotion of an international mindedness and the cultivation of an ideal global worker heighten social divides (Resnik, 2009; Brown & Lauder, 2011). Adriany (2018) suggests that within learner-centered discourses students are viewed as active individuals who can construct their own knowledge, hence child-centeredness resonates with a neoliberal mindset celebrating rationality, individualism and free choice. However, Bailey & Cooker (2018) indicates these consequences to not be inherently linked to the IB's curriculums, but rather because they are enacted in a context of international schools – evidenced to perpetuate neoliberal views by the ruling class (Lowe, 2000; Adriany, 2018).

Concluding remarks

This pool of knowledge highlights how holistic practises might materialise in different ways depending of its context and the ways it can further shape students and teachers' educational experiences (Obj.1). The main lesson from this section is the finding of the varied nature of

HolEd in and of itself. To capture the actual reality of HolEd would be an impossible task as it manifests in ways specific to its site due in part to its eclectic and inclusive nature, accepting a wide range of interpretation for its pedagogical application (see Rudge, 2016). These initial understandings encouraged the elaboration of a broad portrait of what contemporary schooling looks like to contextualise HolEd, and to further discuss my findings, not in isolation, but in dialogue with existing educational discourses. Moreover, the critics of a new student-centered approach (e.g. Biesta, 2012) evoked how these might be implicitly entrenched to neoliberal arguments. Indeed, although new developments come from good intentions, they can get connected to ambiguous outcomes. In this new light, one can envisage that HolEd may have within in it everything that is not, as well as everything that it is. This is something that will be further explored in my discussion of my empirical work in Chapters 5 and 6.

Chapter 4. Methodology

Introduction

The first part of my research question was accomplished within what I have theoretically explored and studied in the literature review. The second part of my research question, divided into Obj.2 and Obj.3 as achieved through an in-depth empirical investigation and aims to bring this research one step further by comparing HolEd theoretical perspectives with practise, whilst representing and illuminating the larger theoretical and practical issues at stake. This chapter outlines a number of things in this regard. First, I detail the options for research approach, before revealing the research strategy adopted. Finally, it concludes with an account of the ethnographic narrative style used for discussing this work.

Methodological options

The overall goal of this study is to make visible the practises of HoldEd in a school setting and the people engaged in those practises and to inform what might constitute a good education. A qualitative approach was favoured to grasp the complex and multi-layered components of the school's characteristics and its various influences, which gave ample scope to explore and elaborate progressively a holistic knowledge of reality (Anadón & Guillemette, 2007).

My work is not purely theoretical and interpretative; my intention was not to examine, analyse, nor evaluate pedagogical applications of HolEd, whereby an extended literature of the selected school system could have done the job. Specifically, my aim was to understand and narrate how holistic practises are perceived and experienced by participants sharing the same patterns of values, beliefs, language, and behaviour. Thus, I choose to do an ethnography in a school over other approaches, as I could directly observe how HolEd played out in practise, how teachers embraced and transmitted the school's values and influenced pupils' education and futures; an unattainable goal if only interviews or storytelling methods had been used.

Threaded throughout all chapters, Biesta's theoretical perspectives, in dialogue with HolEd, could bring to life the implications of holistic approaches providing the opportunity to look at my case within a global and contemporary lens. His theoretical positions, set in a similar context as the case, enabled to make connections back to the discipline, and further endue relevance of the findings to a wider audience – avoiding their meanings to stay confined within the case

(O'Reilly, 2009). Biesta's (e.g. 2009; 2013) critical stance on the constructivist common sense of teaching and learning (see p.13–14) constituted a radical antithesis to the school's pedagogical approach which was a first point of reference to critically engage with what was reported from the field – other qualitative methods such as document analysis could not have fit this theoretical framework. Moreover, in order to illuminate profounder aspects of my research such as teachers' guidance to curate students' inner-journey in relation to others and within educational processes (e.g. Biesta, 2013), an immersion in site allowed a deeper investigation of the meanings people give to their lives, as well as the way they experience and exist in the world with others (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

To feature the broad range of participants' 'interconnected interpretive practices' (ibid., p.4-5) and to get at the essence of 'lived realities' (Saukkho, 2003, p.56), I drew on the criterion of 'polyvocality' as my interest is in studying the multiplicity of voices, their interactions and tensions between them (ibid.). Following Creswell (2002), 'the more complex and encompassing the narrative, the better the qualitative study that view(s) social phenomena holistically' (p.182), which I believe polyvocality attends to. Indeed, one of my aspiration was to position subjects as major players of the research, rather than objects of observation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), whereby a design solely based on participant-observation would not have been enough. Moreover, polyvocality recognises that below dominant narratives, lay quieter voices, which are nonetheless situated at the heart of the debate (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Thus, it enables multiple stories to emerge, yet, provides the opportunity to set these lived experiences against a social context. This is important to avoid 'pointless pluralism', which would recognise all viewpoints as equally 'good' (Saukkho, 2003, p.73).

Finally, accepting my ontological assumption associated with an interpretivist philosophy, self-reflexivity is tainted by personal experiences and social discourses from the site – and beyond – as well as my paradigmatic views, which inherently guided the way I view other people's realities (Saukkho, 2003). Whereas, early ethnographers often sought to demonstrate the accuracy of their conclusions professed as truth (Eriksen & Nielsen, 2001) – although they did not intend to provide generalisable laws – my ethnographic work aligns to a postmodern sensibility moving away from 'the ideal of objective ethnographic accounts' (Foley, 1990, p.xix as cited in Atkinson *et al*., 2001). Thus, my readings might be interpreted differently by others, yet, I remain hopeful of their capability to engender debate or lead to further line of enquiry.

Acquiring knowledge? The *case* studied enfolded to ethnographic methods

An ethnographic design may be bounded to a case study protocol (Fusch *et al*., 2017), as the latter studies a 'social phenomena such as culture and organisation both in depth and within its unique context of place, time, and people' (Jung, 2014 p.3). A fundamental distinction between both strategies is that a 'case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied' (p.34), whereas an ethnography is defined by its methodology (O'Reilly, 2009). The case study is a pertinent strategy when 'why' and 'how' questions are raised, as it highlights what may be learned from that unique case (Yin, 2009). Here, the case is an international school located in an Asian country which houses students pre-kindergarten to 12th grade. It has no more than 300 students, of whom three of lower socio-economic statuses, are granted admission each year and given a full scholarship for the duration of schooling. This case became a site to appreciate the range of possible dynamics and complexities of HolEd within a broader setting and uncover how far it can pull away from the much more controlling global contexts.

The ethnographic design allowed me to get under the skin of the problem. And as HolEd is inclusive by nature, an ethnography permitted to do justice to the school holistic system, as I did not restrict examination to a few aspects. The 'direct and sustained social contact' (Trondman *et al.*, 2018, p.36) over a month-period provided a close and in-depth vision of the school's educational mission, as I navigated between one's personal perspective and the constructed context including all participants (Dibley, 2011). I observed and interpreted a variety of meanings participants held towards their educational journeys and how they made sense of their world, behaved and interacted. Moreover, my daily presence in-situ mitigated risks of bypassing issues as I became gradually aware of the school milieu's intricacies. Due to my intensive involvement and efficient fieldnotes collection, I identified and analysed unexpected issues that surfaced along the inquiry.

A new ethnographic approach (see Saukkho, 2003) inspired me as it upholds the importance of polyvocality, hence, it was essential to collect a rich and detailed data set to represent multiple voices. As mentioned, polyvocality allows voices that 'speak louder' to emerge. In this case, two pivotal figures became key in expanding my knowledge to better answer my research question, yet I remained attentive to how I captured and represented them, as I will come to show in the next section.

The approach in practise

Data collection

Both strategies (case study and ethnography) can handle multiple data sources allowing to confirm new findings and highlight contradictions to achieve a well-rounded illustration of the case (Curtis *et al.*, 2014). Data was collected in the form of participant-observation (watching, listening and participating), formal and informal conversations, focus groups, video recordings and photographs, and secondary data (school documents and academic material). Although I did not only rely on interviews and observations, they constituted the basis of my evidence and analysis (Walford, 2018).

Observation & Interviews

To obtain a surface-level understanding of how the institution functions, I observed nine classrooms over the course of a week. I then narrowed my scope to four classes of different levels to get a deeper comprehension of participants' interactions and relationships, to observe students' involvement in learning processes and differences in pedagogical applications between senior and newer faculty members. The time dedicated to observations helped review my interview questions appropriately, as well as establish good rapport with my informants (Curtis *et al.,* 2014). These two methods nicely complemented each other as I identified patterns in people's behaviours and pay subsequent attention to potential 'ideal behaviour' narrated during interviews (Angrosino, 2012, p.165). Moreover, to gain an insider's perspective, I spent most of my time in the playground, and outdoor cafeteria, in teachers' common room, and I 'hung out' with students. Simultaneously to my active engagement inside the cultural setting, I was attentive to maintain a distance with participants and often remained at the margin of activities to observe and contemplate events in a larger context.

Categories of themes were pre-framed to guide my observations (Curtis *et al.,* 2014), yet, I did not restrain myself to these as I engaged into more spontaneous ways of inquiry. To elicit copious descriptions, I kept a detailed record of my daily observations in a fieldwork diary and few notes were either tipped or recorded on my phone. As I avoided as much as possible to rely on memory, I transcribed them as soon as I could. I used three moves of ethnographic writing: 'inscription', 'transcription', 'description' (Clifford, 1990, in Coles & Thomson, 2016, p.258).

My notes specified factual information and included thick descriptions of events, places, and atmospheres, as well as interactions between people, noting body language and their relationship to objects and space, to which I added my own viewpoints and feelings.

To give additional meaning to my observations, it was essential to establish conditions where information unlikely to occur straightforwardly could be elicited, hence, the use of interviews. A powerful tool to understand people's 'perception, meaning, definition of situations and, construction of reality' (Punch & Oancea, 2014, p.181). The interview design included pre-determined and open-ended questions to guide the conversation, yet, with a willingness to let the interview ebb and flow following new issues as they came up. This scheme allowed candidates to fully express themselves, share their concerns and delve into their area of interests; open-ended questions would have not provided the same depth. All informants demonstrated a genuine willingness to participate and made time accordingly.

Interviews' sampling

Qualitative research usually requires a sample that includes one to thirty respondents (Bengtsson, 2016). To get an extensive perspective of participants' educational lifespan, my sample comprised of ten students (aged thirteen to eighteen, a majority coming from high socio-economic backgrounds), three alumni, six teachers, and one of the two directors. Interviewees were selected by purposive sampling to designate informants that were most likely to deliver relevant information (Curtis *et al.,* 2014). My selection was based on the following criteria: participants' capacity and willingness to be part of the inquiry and their capability to reflect on personal experiences; a mix of new and older members to pinpoint contrasting viewpoints and behaviours as a result of the school's influence. Additionally, senior faculty indicated 'appropriate' students to be interviewed. As being longstanding school members, the latter were trusted to be well-equipped to respond to my questions and had already been part of similar research.

Analysis

The ethnographic mode of textualisation may be understood as an unruly subjective experience (Clifford,1988). My initial ambition to analyse data through systematic processes of coding and thematising – argued to be more of a positivist approach (Mills & Morton, 2013) – was rapidly discarded, as the nature of my research required a holistic way of writing and interpreting.

During fieldwork, unruliness unfolded in the simultaneous process of reflecting, reading, transcribing, analysing and writing; a constant back and forth between theoretical concepts and empirical resources, in which multiple connections between ideas surfaced, some kept, others rejected (Mills & Morton, 2013). Back home, following Jeffrey's (1999) accounts on ethnographic writing, my analysis shaped into a conversation between participants' stories, theoretical insights and those tied to personal enthusiasms. More precisely, I first read and re-read my notes and viewed my recordings to reconnect to people and their experiences. Within this process, I pulled out recurring themes and contradictions. Next, to make sense of my data, I drafted a detailed document of empirical descriptions divided into themes followed by a second text aimed at the development of my theoretical framework in accordance with my findings. Amongst many, I chose one narrative, cascading into shorter stories that illuminates various themes central to the analysis, which became my finished piece of discursive work.

To establish the main thread of my narrative, I used Biesta's subjectification dimension (see p.11) that I associated with the school's motto: 'Know-thyself' – a recurring theme found in my fieldnotes. Through the semiotic resource, I spotted different discourses across a variety of contexts about the school's underlying vision. Thus, to frame my discussion, it became essential to gather multiple interpretations and representation of 'Know-thyself', to identify patterns of understanding and what people did with it. The proverb also acted as an ally to navigate through the tremendous amount of data collected.

Presentation of the discussion

Inspired by narrative ethnography for its powerful way to approach participants' richly textured lives (see Gubrium & Holstein, 2008), I represented this study using the body of the text to relate one story and used footnotes to support my arguments. These footnotes, similar to small windows, provide the reader with a fuller picture of participants' distinct reading experiences[2] and my own insights. Moreover, the discussion presents two leading voices: Amriti (English teacher for high schoolers) and Emilie[3] (seventeen years old student), whereby their opinions expressed bluntly served to critically engage with my topic. Their viewpoints echoed to many others, but due to the limited scope of this dissertation, I was unable to illustrate and connect them all. Finally, although the narrative is conveyed in my own words, I do 'not own it', it is not a story about me; rather, it is an attempt to display 'subjective contours of a shared

[2] All participant's quotes are in italics (in text and footnotes)
[3] Pseudonyms used for all participants.

environment and experience' (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008, p.244, drawing on Plummer's work), documenting parts of my journey confronted to unexpected turns and events. The various accounts of 'Know-thyself' are therefore embedded to my fieldwork experience which transcends into my writing.

Limitations & challenges

Drawbacks of the chosen methodology are to be considered as they influence the reliability of my results. First, a case study, rooted in a specific context, may not have its findings generalised to a wider population (Ashley, 2012). The same limitation exists with ethnographies (Curtis *et al*., 2014). Indeed, depth is often cited as being the trade-off to breadth. Second, the non-probability sampling method impedes a random and equal selection (Curtis *et al*., 2014). Thus, as the selection process rests on my subjectivity a clear-cut objectivity cannot be honoured. Moreover, the sample limited to twenty respondents hindered other voices from being heard (Palinkas *et al.,* 2015) and although a month allowed to encounter a variety of circumstances, only a limited number of situations could be observed and represented. Lastly, restricted by word-count, multiple viewpoints were not revealed and more time would have been necessary to analyse the complete data set in-depth.

For these reasons, my findings cannot simply be replicated to other studies. Yet, my aim was not to gain a detailed assessment of this specific culture nor to generalise findings to a wider population, but to contribute to the understanding of the wider phenomenon of the relevance of HolEd and engage in a critical conversation on what could constitute a good education. My intention was not to produce 'illusory fixed and eternal knowledge' (Johnson, 2011, p.147); it was a means to valorise and feature new ways of knowing, a process of creating and expressing knowledge based on my inherent subjective experience. Yet, my subjective-ness bounded to accounts of the reality observed and their ensuing interpretations aimed to remain as 'loyal as possible' to the 'context, negotiations and inter-subjectivities through which the knowledge was produced' (Pink, 2009, p.8).

Ethics

A number of risks were carefully considered as the research topic required responses from young people of schooling age and those associate to the teaching profession. The school's inclusive philosophy also necessitated to be culturally sensitive. On site, I adopted good

practises to mitigate risks, that which included the provision of appropriate information as to the project's purposes, the nature of participants' involvement, and their right to withdraw at any given time for any given reason. I assured their voluntarily participation, remained mindful of any discomforts arising, and was made cognisant of trusted staff to respond appropriately to any unexpected issues. The case study being located outside the United Kingdom, my own safety was also thoroughly discussed prior to fieldwork.

This research was granted approval by University of Glasgow Ethics Committee (In Appendix).

Chapter 5. Discussion one: The case pedagogical orientations

This chapter begins with an introductory section and a short presentation of the case pedagogical orientations, followed by the main discussion (Chapter 6) whereby I discuss holistic ideas manifesting within the school's motto.

Introduction to the school's adage: 'Know-thyself'

> *'When we started the school, our motto was: the journey matters more than the destination because we felt that processes of learning are more important than outcomes. Gradually, we realised that the biggest journey is not outside, it's inside. To get to know who you truly are is one of the most fundamental human need. An existential quest. So, we wrote 'Know-thyself'.'* – Director

Ergas (2017) states that 'in our current system, minds are mostly shaped by practises that dissociate self and education' (p.221), which implies that if education's purpose is to engage students in a quest of knowing themselves then their full embodied selves should be taken into account. As shown in the literature, HolEd seeks to encompass multiple layers of meaning and experience for individuals to find identity, meaning, and purpose in life; a perspective shared by both directors. Their conception of self-inquiry, as being of acute importance to the entire work of education, was greatly inspired by Krishnamurti who regarded education as an act of awakening one's mind, enlivened by a balanced development of all human aspects (Nakagawa, 2000). In that sense, the school's philosophy clearly rejects the common understanding of education to train pupils 'to divorce their rationality from the rest of themselves', educating 'from the neck up' (Lelwica, 2009, p. 125). As such, if education has the responsibility to lead students to become independent subjects, then a turn inward to explore and question their own mind seems necessary; as otherwise only the socialisation and qualification dimensions are fostered (Biesta, 2009). For this study, following Ergas (2017), I associate the process of subjectification with the school's ethos of 'Know-thyself', which coloured my interpretation of the latter.

Presenting the case: An exploration of the self within the pedagogical framework

> *'If we have really innovative strategies, where the learner is engaged and learning meaningful, then we won the battle. Children will be able to compete, able to develop their personalities, their inner-self. Here, children develop high levels of confidence because their sense of self was nurtured.'* – Director

In many ways, the faculty showed its dedication, to send into the world, individuals who are in touch with themselves, open-minded and kind. The founding belief is that joy should infuse all learning processes and the overall schooling experience. Holistic values were seen on many levels: in the connection/inquiry-based pedagogy, within the united community attentive to democratic principles, and under the overarching umbrella of teachers' genuine care and support of students' wellbeing. The cultivation of pupils' individuality and qualities was a genuine mission shared amongst all staff. Within the holistic pedagogical framework, teachers create a conducive environment in which young minds have the opportunity to explore a range of interests, discover what they are good at, creatively use their skills in areas where they are gifted, and ultimately progress purposefully into the next step of their lives.

According to the school, the primary feature of a quest to self-knowledge is deeply embedded to the question of *why* students should care about what they learn. Knowledge is not conveyed in an authoritative and mindless manner. Quite the opposite, students are highly encouraged to question and find meaning to their learning, rather than focusing on academic achievements. Therefore, to question what is learnt and to attend to the diversified students' population, a project-based pedagogy was meticulously crafted by both directors, that which considered the aspirations and needs of all students. Each project, initiated by teachers, responds to a collective interest and includes a wide range of creative, multisensorial, and playful activities. Specifically, the pedagogy fully embraces mind-body-space techniques and embeds abstract concepts to visual arts to encourage multiple means of expression and to creatively and deeply engage students with the learning material. In an attempt to mirror the intrinsic interconnectedness of experiences and environment, all disciplines are connected organically.

This transdisciplinary approach is also seen as a means to avoid an over-crowded curriculum. What matters is the quality of the learning, not the quantity of knowledge acquired. Thus, reasoning through a 'less-is-more' approach and a skill-heavy/content-light curriculum,

teachers frequently highlight the idea of 'learning how to learn' (Wiliam, 2011; Miller, 2019). Critical thinking and autonomy (two values held in high esteem by most participants) is exercised through solving-problems methods and research activities. To refine students' learning abilities, they are requested to conduct a number of self-reflective tasks involving introspective work – encapsulating the notion of 'Know-thyself'. In that respect, older students emphasised that they had grown into confident and independent learners.

The school's core philosophy is inclusivity; hence, it welcomes students from all socio-economic backgrounds as well as diverse abilities. Diversity is promoted and used as a learning tool, through which group work is the main ingredient to foster inclusion. A learning community is fostered through a wide range of practises that enliven communal experiences focusing on building harmonious social relationships and discrediting competition amongst students. Teachers actively communicate that self-knowledge cannot be acquired in isolation; thus, pupils learn to articulate constructive and thoughtful feedbacks through frequent peer-group assessments. To learn from each other expand their worldviews, heighten a sentiment of cohesiveness and prepare them for future professional endeavours. One teacher commented that to be part of a school that values diversity, while partaking in hands-on and collaborative tasks, also allows creativity to emerge while simultaneously developing students' sense of self. Finally, community connections assumed to cultivate a sense of stewardship and leadership, also occurred outside the classroom, involving the entire school or reaching out to surrounding neighbourhoods. These initiatives showed the school's conviction that individual growth may only be fully realised when one is made aware of others' realities.

Chapter 6. Discussion two: Holistic ideas manifesting in the school's adage

An exploration of the self within the free and safe space

As I passed the gate, my first impression was of the inviting, colourful, and joyful environment, one that is located in the middle of an urban, yet endearing, chaos. An oasis surrounded by low white walls and tall leafy trees, apes jumping from one branch to another. The atmosphere reflected the dynamic city as I witnessed the joyful exuberance of the noisy schoolyard, punctuated by laughing and screaming children running from the open-air café to the tennis table. The word 'freedom' immediately entered my mind.

Whilst attending my first classroom observation, I was astonished by children's freedom of movement[4]; an approach defined by the directors in opposition to the jail-like Foucauldian model of the authoritative traditional classroom, argued to frustrate students' full potential and growth. I noticed quite readily that the non-coercive/non-punitive environment[5] was considered necessary for students to evolve at their own pace, without being imposed to do things, nor fearing to express themselves verbally and physically, thus rejecting the idea to make them fit into a mould; a prerequisite for an exploration of the self.

Intrigued by the share of concerns that freedom could bring in a schooling context, I questioned both students and teachers on their personal definition and experiences related to it. All teachers proclaimed that freedom comes with responsibilities and is viewed as gift for students to better themselves. The philosophy is based on mutual trust amongst both parties and pupils are expected to behave responsibly. One senior faculty explained that:

> '*In this school, you must have heard a lot…Freedom is very strongly exercised. But here freedom is to better yourself. I always tell my students: 'If the school gives you this flexibility, that means I have tremendous trust, I*

[4] Pupils have the opportunity to move, sit or stand the way they see fit, and leave the room without needing to ask.

[5] E.g. no punishments; no fixed-schedule; no dress-code; no bells; no grades. Freedom was unanimously acknowledged to be multi-faceted, and was usually defined in opposition to the controlling climate pervading most schools in the country.

want you to be autonomous, I want you to take responsibilities for your actions. Because there are consequences also.'

Freedom of expression was undisputed and open communication was exercised from a young age; pupils being encouraged to question the purposes of a task, give their opinion on whether they like it or not and why, and to voice any kind of viewpoints and feelings – a skill that I observed being generously practised[6]. Students unanimously considered the school to be a safe haven to express themselves and to be who they desire to be, without fearing to be punished, judged, or belittled[7]. This thought was articulated and expanded by one high-school student:

> *'Society does not allow us to talk about everything but here you can freely express your ideas and be open, no matter how backwards or forward it is. It's a free space, you get to share your ideas, to hear others' viewpoints, try to change people's minds. That's what schools should allow and here they do.'*

I believe this to be a feasible project when taking place within the loving support of teachers. Students learn to shamelessly embrace their emotional selves as they are told that emotions are powerful communicators and integral part of life[8]. The support of the emotional domain was the theme most whole-heartily expressed by students. Reading my transcripts and diving into my memories, I can still feel their sincere gratitude towards teachers' tolerant and compassionate guidance. These relationships imprinted with a loving kindness were very special and represent a unique feature of the school. Communal and intimate connections – pivotal components of HolEd – were felt throughout, enhancing a light-hearted and healthy atmosphere. The director assumed that when people are deeply hurt, they cannot contribute positively to their surrounding and society; thus, she believed essential to cultivate students' healthy state of mind. She closely related wellbeing to the purpose of education and the quest of self-knowledge.

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[6] A dash of exasperation in his voice, a student validated my observation: *'It's very loud and can get out of hands. Most classes are based around discussions, it's very interactive. Sometimes it's too much, but it calms down and we focus on work.*'

[7] *'They treat you as human, they don't demean any of our experiences or think they're stupid or naïve.'*

[8] '*They tell us: 'You can cry, you can get angry, you can express your emotions here, tell us what you feel'. That shows the closeness between teachers and students.*'

> '*If you don't address every aspect of the self, then that lob-sided nature of education will lead to more frustrations, there'll be gaps in our development. Ultimately, we are happy when we are balanced. The purpose of education is to find your purpose! If I'm not on my life path, no matter how hard I try, I'm not going to be happy. An unhappy individual will create an unhappy family and an unhappy society*.'

Teachers also assumed that to recognise students' affective dimension did not come at the expanse of academic work. Wellbeing was perceived as essential to motivate and enable joyful learning[9]. In contrast, one student raised doubts on the predominant attention given to mental health, which she feared to interfere with academic rigor – her opinion echoed a few other voices. However, she finally shared how immensely thankful she was towards the humane and comprehensive community during painful times.

> '*My first year I was in a time of grief and the fact that I was just allowed to exist that was really significant. People here are allowed to be themselves, and I was allowed to be myself, even if it meant to come to school in my pajamas, sit down, and zone out completely. The fact that the school is always accepting people from different walks of life, that's huge*.'

The billboard: a window to the unforeseen

This transition will probably feel quite abrupt to the reader, yet it might reflect efficiently the unexpected and uncomfortable feeling I was confronted with on my first day of fieldwork. Prior to my arrival, I had a sense of what I was going to find as I had extensively researched the school's philosophy. I was thrilled by its dedication to educate students within holistic ideals and by its spiritual sensibility argued to expand self-awareness and cultivate a sense of oneness with the community. Thus, going into this study, I was not aware of the extent of my overly positive views. Not surprisingly, I was confronted along the research to disappointments when participants' viewpoints or behaviours did not 'fit' my expectations, or when a situation disturbed my assumptions on how I thought things should be. I went to the field with expectations that were met to some extent, however, as I dug deeper, unpredicted occurrences surfaced which had an impact on the data I am now interpreting.

[9] One middle-school teacher said: *'My role is to understand them, to see that every child is happy first, if they are able to do. They shouldn't feel that they can't do it. I think this is every teacher's primary role: to motivate every child as a learner.'*

One of my first journal entries related my sceptical reaction towards the billboard exhibited at the entrance, which showcased the universities alumni were accepted to. This billboard was an abrupt reminder that I was conducting my study in an international school; considered as sites located within human capital discourses, in which neoliberal ideas are promoted (Adriany, 2018). I speculated that the board might serve as a proof of the school's success – which would also justify the adoption of IB programmes; a supposition confirmed by the director.

While I was studying the labels, I asked the teacher next to me if the school aims to align to international standards. She gave me a complicit look and nodded positively. She furtively added that education happens in the classroom and if one wishes the system to change, it can only be done as '*an insider's job*', despite higher orders dictating how education should be. This was my first encounter with Amriti. I was quite surprised by her explicit remark that reminded me of teachers' decisive role, as ultimately, it is their value judgments that matters, and not what is told in higher policymaking instances (Biesta, 2012).

That same day, I inquired Emilie, about the billboard's implicit message. She commented that most of her peers are extremely academically-driven and aspire to attend renown universities; several of these institutions being invited all year long to recruit students. The billboard query opened the doors to numerous critical discussions about the school. Her main criticism was the absence of communication on the existing alternatives to higher education. She considered this silence to perpetuate the dominant discourse of the linear pathway that one should follow to succeed in life, which worked against a true promotion of diversity and different modes of existing in the world. While admitting her critical stance, she stressed that 'Know-thyself, '*the over-heard mantra*', has meaning only for students who found their path; the notion being much less tangible for the ones who feel '*lost*' concerning future life prospects[10]. She concluded with a sudden realisation: '*This school is an elite school with an alternative pedagogy!*'

[10] Amriti clarified that in the country higher education is seen as the obvious choice, especially for the elite (the dominant class represented in school). Academic excellence is highly regarded and parental pressure to conform is strong. In this example, socialisation that 'inserts individuals into existing ways of doing and being' (Biesta, 2010, p.40) operates quite implicitly as the route to academia is left unchallenged, actively valued by societal norms. Amriti further accused this mindset to cause prejudice to students:
'It is hugely detrimental to not give students an alternate option. We have to stop thinking that students are machines. They don't need to know what they want right after. Let them figure it out. Otherwise, they'll end up wasting four years, and ten years down the line, they'll have a mid-life crisis, change their entire career. Because parents were in a hurry to get them into college? What is the purpose of this one-track idea? The school has a 50% responsibility. If we do our job, there is more likelihood that parents will listen. But who is talking to them about that? Apart from me.'

This first day signed the beginning of a month-long research prone to conflicted feelings waving between admiration, confusion, excitement and resentment, as I witnessed the famous discrepancy between theory and practise. I also concretely experienced data saturation. Even if interviewed independently, a majority of participants' responses were strikingly similar and some narratives strangely redundant echoing the director's public speeches.

A rigid pedagogical application of holistic methods

The second day, one teacher insisted that I observe his teaching methods to capture how the school's pedagogy is applied. A few minutes later, to my surprise, he instructed me to teach and left me alone with students. Over an hour passed when he came back. I was confused by what I was witnessing: a disengaged teacher, barely interacting with pupils, staring at his smartphone and fully relying on an active-learning approach that he viewed as a Sacro-saint tool to improve any learners' language skills. If the school's mission was to guide students to know themselves better, this class did not seem a good depiction of that attempt. In fact, this encounter raised multiple questions concerning the benefits of the holistic pedagogy if applied in an instrumental manner and not practised by critical and committed practitioners.

I progressively realised senior faculty and the directors' reluctance to challenge the holistic pedagogical framework. I asked one experienced teacher whether she believed that limitations occurred within the methodology. She replied:

> '*No. I think our school has a very strong tool, which is flexibility. We are more interested in how…The impulses, let the kids explore, let them find out, enjoy learning and all that! The outcome will definitely be there*.'

She further emphasised the importance given on the processes of learning and learners' needs. According to her, the integrated and coherent curriculum that fosters joyful learning experiences inherently engenders positive outcomes. Simultaneously, three teachers revealed loopholes in the pedagogy and their consequences on some students' educational journey. I raised this concern to another experienced teacher to which she proceeded to explain:

> '[The director] *says: 'If you follow the methods, it will happen, don't worry. If you don't go away from it, then just do it blindly… But don't skip through the processes, you may be taking away something you don't know*.'

Yet, these three others teachers confided their apprehensions on unchallenged ways of doing and raised issues they had identified, such as the lack of stand-alone subjects and the focus on the direct application of what is learnt at the expense of in-depth practises of academic disciplines[11].

> '*I really love the pedagogy, but I also see what is lacking. There are lots of gaps in children's education because it is so much tied to the projects. There isn't enough time for practise. You learn a skill, apply it and go on to something else. But certain things have to be trained in a rigorous way like English, especially when not your first language. And there are consequences in higher grades.*'

The consequences she refers to were explained by Amriti during one informal discussion about the school's inclusive philosophy. A share of faculty believes that if the pedagogy is correctly executed, all children will achieve their maximum academic potential[12]. Amriti revealed that, as they reach higher grades, most students prone to academic difficulties – the majority labelled as the '*municipal kids*' coming from deprived areas – only attain a basic level in arithmetic and literacy. In theory, there would be no reason for them to be academically behind as they attend school from kindergarten and participate in the same activities as the rest of their peers. However, this consideration does not acknowledge that, conversely to wealthier children raised in English-speaking environments and who acquire a rich cultural background throughout their upbringings, underprivileged students do not have access to similar assets. I associated this concern to a Bourdieusian critic of how a lack of cultural capital can lead to serious injustices on academic and future life accomplishments. Amriti further underlined that the stress-free atmosphere might be less detrimental to better-off students, possessing enough resources to be successful IB graduates, whereas the less-privileged ones only pick up relaxed ways of working, and end up obtaining a local certificate (deemed as lesser). I associated this last thought to the satisfied student-customer whose learning process is made 'as smooth and enjoyable as possible' (Biesta, 2013 p.135), embedded to the more problematic outcome of a comfortable

[11] '*The absence of stand-alone subjects is the limitation of such pedagogy. You need practice and discipline! To learn to be dedicated.'*

[12] To illustrate this claim, an ambiguous comment was expressed by one senior teacher. She implied that it is up to the under-privileged group to adapt to the dominant one: *'Inclusion is very important for us. We have kids coming from economically and socially deprived families and they have to feel as one of them. Our educational tools should make them feel as a part of it*.'

educational journey (justified by the concern of wellbeing) that could deviate attention from structural factors (Ecclestone, 2014). The emphasis on a free and caring environment clearly stem from good intent, yet could it come at the expanse of a more structured learning process and impede these children the right to an academic curriculum, and the fruits thereof to pass IB examinations like the rest?

I became quite frustrated and conflicted as my readings and reflections were in complete dissonance with what I was being reported by some members of the faculty. While reading Biesta's (2004) work rejecting the monopoly of psychology to theorise, research, and determine learning processes, I was simultaneously told that through a careful and uncritical application of the methods any students would learn what is needed. Both directors frequently reiterated to teachers to trust the powerful pedagogical tools inevitably producing outcomes. Moreover, I was disconcerted with most teaching-learning discourses coloured by a learner-centered vocabulary, openly discarding the concept of teaching. While there are many positive features to enhance students' learning[13], it also leads to the simultaneous withdrawal of teachers, which in turn might leave them stymied by questions that ask them to think about their role as teachers in non-technical terms (e.g. Biesta, 2009). Even if within the pedagogy teachers do have a certain amount of flexibility, the pedagogical framework had to be left untouched; as a proof of its success to reach the directors' ambition to become '*mainstream*'[14]? Hence, tuition classes were greatly discouraged, deemed to interfere with pedagogical processes, and stand-alone disciplines, assumed to create artificial boundaries between subjects, compromised the flow of the transdisciplinary approach.

It seems that the fear and unwillingness to challenge the pedagogy aligns to the technocratic form of education that narrows the scope of what can be talked in the school and possibly leading to some serious issues. Following Biesta's (2018) admonition 'When education becomes envisaged and enacted as control, the subject drops out, it disappears from sight' (p.41) – which here, the so-called '*slow learners*', might pay the higher price[15].

[13] E.g. its response to authoritarian and one-side forms of education that sustains acts of control (Biesta, 2017).

[14] The director stressed that: *'If such pedagogy has to reach a larger number of teachers and students, we have to succeed in the academic part. You can't just say: 'I am an alternative school.' We have to prove that it works, otherwise it will not spread.'*

[15] Nevertheless, I am not implying that all teachers at all time are turned into mere suppliers and students into objects; Neither I intend to prove that the unquestioned pedagogy has unremitting consequences on teachers' teaching or hermeneutically entraps them in a way of doing.

The spiritual dimension?

Perplexed with my findings, I had to remind myself which aspects had awoken my enthusiasm months prior to fieldwork. It was the school's transparent stance to foster a spiritual dimension that had first appealed to me. When scanning through the literature, the notion of spirituality clearly resisted definitions being comprised to a wide range of understandings and was argued to impede educators to work within that domain preventing them to incorporate it in the curriculum (Ergas, 2011). However, knowing that both directors emphasised spirituality as an innovative feature of their establishment, I was extremely keen to discover this dimension at play; the latter highlighted in a bright blue colour on the mission statement decorating one of the outdoor walls.

I presumed the notion of 'Know-thyself' to be linked and explained by my participants when enquired about the spiritual element. Eager to grasp the meaning they held to it, and as an idealist, I expected to hear inspiring insights on how the school guides students to the depth of their being, igniting a sense of belonging and creating a desire to contribute to change. However, my hopes failed to be satisfied as no shared vision emerged and its definition remained equivocal. Students interviewed were generally dubious on any ideas associated to the immaterial sphere and teachers mostly understood spirituality in technical terms (a set of methods to develop students' intuition to facilitate learning)[16].

The director mentioned her wish to implement a 'consciousness curriculum' embedded in everyday learning activities; a syllabus mainly composed of exercises to develop intuition, imagination and meditative states. These methods would allow students to unravel unknown spaces in themselves, to improve states of sustained calmness and enhance their overall wellbeing (Miller, 2006). The director further communicated that these techniques were not yet harmoniously integrated-across all grades, and accentuated that such curriculum had to be first crafted within the teachers' community, as a group, not as an imposed framework. I finally understood that her vision was not yet fully conveyed, so the spiritual dimension could only be partially observed. However, something else struck me. At the time of the interview, I was

[16] Teachers had recently been part of workshops led by the directors to develop spiritually-based activities. Spirituality was often justified to be an instrument to foster learning, to not 'scare' students and parents. One teacher expressed: *'We need to be careful, it's not something religious or spiritual, but it's to develop learning. It is subtlety done'*.

already aware of the challenges mentioned above (see p.34) and was expecting the director's response to my question – *'What improvements could be undertaken in the school?* - to revolve around potential solutions to these issues; yet she only spoke about the new curriculum. A few days later, I shared this reflection with Amriti who bluntly expressed that new elements should not be added but instead directors should question what is already there and not working.

I considered the 'consciousness curriculum' to run the risk to turn into a set of practises applied mechanically to enhance learning and wondered if these practises would be more beneficial when pursued in their own integrity. I struggled with a similar thought concerning the contribution of art when practised in connection to other disciplines, a sort of added-value to enhance learning, and not perceived as a powerful means in itself, to dive into the self. With this mindset, I could only locate 'Know-thyself' as an instrumental quest to acquire skills and knowledge; a quest in order *to do* something, rather than *to become* someone (Biesta, 2017).

The more I investigated, the more I felt confused with the meaning the school held towards its motto. On one hand, the school's philosophy, espoused by teachers' commitment, seemed to engage in the subjectification dimension (Biesta, 2009), cultivating children's inner experiences, enhancing collaboration and solidarity, and disregarding the stultifying impact of an exclusive focus on qualification, standardisation and competition. On the other, many participants understood an inner-journey as orientated towards work-related or higher education goals; hence, a more individualistic, entrepreneurial pursuit[17]. One that seemed to be fostered by the pedagogy centered around learners' desires. These methods and their respective aims closely related to twenty-first century educational discourses targeting an appropriate education for students confronted to a fast-paced society[18].

At this point of the research, multiple question arose. If students are encouraged to pursue only what they like, would it sacrifice any difficult or remote processes inherent to life, which can lead to a profound sense of satisfaction and growth when the latter are figured out and accomplished? If students are solicited to inquire about their interests, which may only orbit

[17] In that regard, a soon to be graduate claimed that the school gives students an entrepreneurial mindset, where talent has a price: '*They say that if you are good at something, sell it!'*

[18] This fast-pace digitized lifestyle strangely resonated one student's future academic interests that left me with an uneasy feeling: *'I believe that science is the future, I want to take part in these transformations. Mankind needs to progress, not by staying still, but by changing everything. We need changes that impact everyone, regardless of religion, sex, economic backgrounds.'*

around 'common sense knowledge' acquired through everyday experiences[19] (Young, 2014), could it take away the chance for teachers to bring radically new and provocative knowledge, one which transcends and emancipates children from their daily experience? One that could challenge who they think they are and who they want to become?

Left with these questions, I became further disconcerted with the school's resonant rejection of teaching. Most faculty acknowledged that the purpose of education is to offer an environment in which students' natural qualities can take root and grow; hence, learning is believed to occur from within, not imposed by an external presence. Biesta's (2013) words stood in complete dissonance to these beliefs:

> 'The experience of being taught is about those situations in which something enters our being from outside, so to speak, as something that is fundamentally beyond the control of the learner. To be taught – to be open to receiving the gift of teaching – thus means to be able to give such interruptions a place in ones' understanding and one's being.' (p.57)

Therefore, could denying or neglecting students ripe knowing and fresh knowledge impede possibilities for new understandings of the self to emerge?

Turning point: A new understanding of self-knowledge

During week three, with a hint of cynicism and hopelessness, I asked Amriti to share her belief about the spiritual dimension. As she gave her personal response, a feeling of excitement erupted in me. She understood the notion of spirituality as being an integral part of the journey one must undertake to know themselves. Her interpretation embraced the views of HolEd which recognises an epistemology of spirituality as authentic and compassionate ways of knowing and acting in the world, engaging the whole self rather than calculating the ego (R. Miller, 2000).

> '*To me the most spiritual thing is to be connected to yourself and be honest with who you are. To be more empathetic and authentic, you need to self-reflect, accept that you will be ever changing and you won't always be the best person you can be. If you are at peace with that and are given the tools*

[19] In place of textbooks information, students are given brochures and pamphlets assumed to be of more value because connected to their real-life situations.

> *to challenge yourself but also to love yourself – which inherently leads to accept others – that is spiritual work. And I believe education has a big role to play here*.' – Amriti

I asked what spiritual work concretely meant in the classroom. She explained that through literature, a space is created for critical dialogues to surface between the self and the world. She encouraged students to bring their personal stories, to find connections between their experiences and the characters', to reflect upon the author's perspectives and look back inward with honesty. This way of teaching aligns with the strong inclination of HolEd to convey a 'civic consciousness' through storytelling and the arts, referred as:

> 'A facet of subjectivity demonstrated by openness to participation and interaction with the wider social field and a readiness to encounter difference, with what has been mentally constructed as 'other.' (Taggart, 2001, p.332)

To promote this 'readiness' Amriti insisted to include in young people's education, authors outside the mainstream, the left-outs, the unheard. In her view, inclusivity needs to be expressed in the curriculum[20], to become '*better about being inclusive in our thoughts*', she explained. Thus, to bring past knowledge to the present by positioning students in a broader historical context, provides a sense of identity and acute sensibility towards plurality, which further enables to better apprehend the future. Her work would ultimately suggest an encounter with the self, with others, and the otherness (Biesta, 2017).

During one of her English lectures, she brought up the theme of individuality, articulating that to become better human beings and to pursue the goodness that lies in everyone, one has to acknowledge that their identity is multiple, never complete and has to constantly evolve. If a person refuses to change and settles in their comfort zone, they escape self-confrontation and fail to share their unique attributes with the world. This insight ignited a new understanding about the school system. If we would to transpose 'Know-thyself' to an institution, it would mean to acknowledge, interrogate, and confront its weaknesses and its strengths in a pursuit of growth towards betterment. Yet, when education is modelled into a risk-free process, it

[20] She believes that inclusivity should be engaged with thoughtfully: *'Inclusivity by itself is not enough. It's not just about saying: We have a classroom of twenty people of which five are from somewhere else. So what? Does it change what is taught and the examples you give? Are all examples upper-caste based? Are all examples men? The role of the teacher can only function well if we are constantly vigilant about our teaching but that requires serious dedication and reflection.'*

eradicates the possibility to be questioned (Biesta, 2013). Therefore, if we consider education as a mirror to our ever-changing and imperfect selves, we may also recognise that education is a process that is erratic, not uniform. (Biesta, 2013). In this case, the pedagogy viewed as a perfectly efficient instrument to enable students' learning might not be problematic in itself, yet if the tool is left unchallenged – not matter how good or strong it is – undesirable outcomes will continue to occur. To critically question pedagogical applications that stem from laudable principles, also means to discuss and redefine elusive or taken-for-granted terms[21] that yield concerns in this particular case.

> '*We are not seeing the power they can have when aligned with the pedagogy. They have been misused and abused over the years because of the power they hold, yet they have something they started from. If we can pinpoint what that is and recreate it within our pedagogy, then we would make a much stronger case. You can only build that kind of strength if you come from each angle and use a little bit of different kinds of thoughts in order to foster that kind of intelligence and self-confidence* [as practitioners].' – Amriti

I associated Amriti's opinions with Biesta's (2012) call to relocate teachers at the centre of the educational process, moving beyond an education reduced on the learner. Teaching is a praxis that heavily depends upon a person's wisdom to make sound judgments on what should be done within a specific setting, in relation to what one aims to achieve, regardless of the pedagogy. Thus, it is a process which lies at the heart of the classroom and 'not a matter of the execution of directives from elsewhere[22]' (Biesta, 2012, p.39).

The reclaim of teachers

The holistic educator Lowes (2014) states that: 'If we understand schools to be a microcosm of our society, then changes we wish to see in the world need to be developed, practised and felt in the classrooms' (p.37). In that pursuit, teachers must remain aware that they symbolise a key

[21] Several notions were repeatedly cited by participants, such as: '*discipline*', '*authority*', '*freedom*', '*consistency*' and '*repetition*'.

[22] In this case, such 'directives' could be the ones imposed by the strict pedagogical guidelines; a consideration that aligns to one teacher's comment: '[The directors] *are not in touch with the ground reality. They say: 'If you make sure that it's well integrated and you find ways to tie it in, then you can get students enough practise'. They are very against tuitions classes but they're not in a position to say that because they don't have much of an idea of the levels.'*

resource for young people 'coming into the world' (see p.11). Drawing on Biesta's work, Wienk (2017) argues that:

> 'Entering an existential domain in an educational setting…asks for a paradigm shift in the concept and pedagogy of teaching. Maybe the heart of the matter is what a teacher is able to offer through who they are.' (p.280)

To offer yourself comes with the will to be authentic. To genuinely lead students in the depth of their being demands educators to acutely reflect on the intricacies of their own multiple-selves and their teaching processes; a thought fully embraced by holistic educators. In that sense, most faculty members' preoccupation emerge from the assertion that teachers 'teach who [they] are' (Palmer, 1998), hence 'the more teachers know about themselves – the private curriculum within – the more their personal decisions are apt to be about how to pave the way for better teaching' (Hamachek, 1999, p. 209). If one is to project their unique selves onto students, then better teaching requires to express a clear personal agency[23] (Hansen, 2017). Throughout the month, I contemplated that good teaching also lies in the caring and loving teacher community determined to give their best to students (e.g. Noddings, 1992, Palmer, 1998) – what I pondered multiple times to be the school's greatest strength. Teachers ensured that all students felt confident in their academic and emotional growth. Their devotion paralleled acts of openness and acceptance: to receive pupils' reality as it is, without interrupting, imposing nor judging any of their experiences, and yet always engaging in a dialogue with them (hooks, 2000). Along these lines, the director defended the beneficial attitude of '*letting go*' considered to be freeing, and not to be feared.

> '*Traditional education is about controlling teachers. Teachers are scared of letting go, they fear chaos and indiscipline. But the opposite happens. If you let go and you trust the children, then it's far better.*'

One graduate student confirmed her belief:

> '*What they tried to do was very organic. There were some loopholes but they kept it as how life is, naturally unfolding.* [The director] *would guide and*

[23] Commenting enthusiastically on the teachers' community, one student expressed his appreciation of their self-awareness: *'It's amazing that they're so willing to get better and they understand that they are not perfect either, they are human beings. It is a process for both of us.'*

recommend, never force. That also requires patience, to allow that space not just for one child, but for a whole group.'

Other students perceived these attitudes as '*passive*', detrimental to their behaviours (especially in relation to the lack of discipline[24]). Along these lines, Emilie confessed to be frequently struck by students' individualists and careless demeanours. She believed that educators should be key figures to conscientise students on individual responsibility[25] in order to create a more tangible awareness that they are not the centre of their world.

'*Teachers should really emphasise on individual responsibility and above all, make students aware that they are not alone. Some are conscious of this, but others – and teachers included – really have this belief that only they exist. Everything is centered around them. At times, I really have the impression of a fake open-mindedness.*'

These worries complement Biesta's (2013) invitation for a pedagogy of interruption (see p.11) not one that overpowers students, but one interested in moving away from an ego-logical way of being to another-centered way of being (Biesta, 2017a). Where teachers have the difficult task to interrupt, select, and challenge students' immediate desires, and to put them in perspective 'in relation to what and who is other' (ibid. p.432). With this in mind, to exist in a de-centered way could also relate to the ethos of interconnectedness (see p.5). The school attempts to foster this principle by strongly encouraging community service and group work that is aimed to enhance a sense of kinship and collective responsibility. In regards to comments on group work, I admit having been quite stunned hearing Emilie's mixed feelings. She explained that collective feedback ensuing most activities is primarily related to accomplished academic work and is rarely based on how students manage their interactions, to which she suggests at times could poorly fail. She further argued that to empower students is in itself a worthy intention; yet, she expected teachers to be more opiniated and to confront student's ways of thinking and doing, in order to help them grow into truly responsible beings and become more sensitive towards others.

[24] Many students confessed wanting more '*rules*', which aligns to Amriti's call to challenge these fixed connoted notions. On discipline, she proceeded to explain that it is assumed to hamper a free-flowing and creative environment, yet creativity can flourish anywhere, whereas discipline is not innate and has to be taught. She believed that with discipline, boundaries can be pushed further and make students realise that great achievements come with sustained work.

[25] Emilie, an activist at heart, hoped that teachers would '*positively condition*' students to become aware of important timely issues and trigger the desire to act. She specifically focused on the lack of environment education, to which one teacher commented that the school '*still has a long way to go'* in improving students' general disrespectful behaviours.

'*They promote the responsible and autonomous student by giving us freedom to choose what is best for us. This is one way to do it, but I believe that there are other ways to give us a greater sense of responsibility. We need to be guided! Without their guidance, we are able to do things on our own, but we need to be shaken up. There is a very lenient aspect in the school. Clearly, the backlash of this freedom.*'

Although, all teachers interviewed genuinely shared the desire to see their students '*be better human beings and make a change in the world*', to engage students to delve into these grand motives, critical reflections on the aims and means of education should be seriously considered. And as I have exposed, the focus on learners and their desires may hinder such attempts and induce teachers 'to shy away from difficult questions and inconvenient truths' (Biesta, 2013, p.57). In that sense, Amriti stressed the importance of teachers' work as '*a question of action*' rather than only of intention. She clearly conveyed her passion to offer students with provoking questions that would disturb their uncontested insertion into existing orders, which in turn would exercise their capacity to become independent from these orders; '*She's the catalyst to a lot of self-reflection*' said one student, *'I had not realised how much impact I have…I started making different lifestyles decisions'.* Amriti's daily efforts to promote politically-inclined thinking also appeared to work as counterfeit to Apple's 'epistemological fog' (see p.10) – which seems to be of great importance in a site with concealed neoliberal values.

Both, Amriti's efforts and Emilie's appeals highlight the importance of the ethical recognition that the world is shared, which leads to a discovery of responsibility and unavoidably leads to encounter resistance (e.g. Biesta, 2013). A process of guiding students into becoming subjects cannot be forced, yet, as mentioned, it may unfold by giving them new perspectives, challenge their ways of thinking and leaving possibilities to explore their own relation to existing discourses. In that sense, teachers guiding their students to a journey of knowing themselves would move beyond the free-willed individual pursuit of finding what one is good at.

'*Here at least, there is a little push towards this vague idea of 'Make the world a better place', which I think is not good enough. What does that mean? Don't litter? Or dedicate all the wonderful skills you have to actually change something. You can't just tell a kid: 'Be a good person and make the world a better place'. It's so vague, how could that be a motivation? Why aren't we sooner teaching our students that they are already a part of the world? Give*

them that sense of belonging and ownership. *Then maybe they will have something to work towards*.' – Amriti

Following Amriti's plea, if education is viewed as a critical and emancipatory process, teachers then might endorse an interruptive and unsettling posture to bring students out of their limited subjectivity; in order for them to widen their horizons to experience, think and live with others. I do not believe that this venture would hamper the pleasure in the learning process, that the school highly cares for, nor would it turn teachers into senseless controlling figures. Quite the opposite. Instead, I argue that it would enliven the democratic and dialogical practises, already well implemented in this space, and increase everyone's attentiveness of their own responsibility and uniqueness. Consequently, this may further thrive into radical interaction, inspiring the betterment of society and the self.

INTERLUDE

At the end of the process, my own perspectives as a researcher widened: to become a better researcher – and a better person – I challenged myself in this process to move beyond a yes/no and true/false perspective. I understood that research is to welcome the unexpected and the plurality of truths, not to search for what I thought was due, proper, or necessary.

'If you know exactly what you want or what you're going to prove, then you go to the field for a few exemplifications and you write what you always knew. But if you are willing to get disoriented and confused, which can feel, well, disorienting and confusing, it's not necessarily a bad thing, out of it can come real gems.' (Willis in Mills and Gibb 2000, p.394)

Following my theoretical partner, Biesta (2013), if to teach is to be human, to accept fundamental weaknesses, incertitudes and risks of the purposeful, creative process we call education, then I believe it may also be applied to research. Writing engages risk; the one to reveal myself as I uncovered the layers of my ideas, assumptions, and feelings in a pursuit of preserving a humble and truthful stance. It is also to accept that not all readers will agree with my interpretations and approve of the story I decided to tell.

My supervisor once told me: *'When something is as prominent as it is vague as Know-thyself, it is always going to be open to interpretation*'. I realise that knowing yourself is more about complexity than clarity. Diving into the depth of the subject, a plurality of views emerged, which shaped the school's recurring motive into an infinity of ways. Some viewpoints were in harmony with my own beliefs, others distanced themselves from my understanding. And it proved to be very difficult to let go of the range of questions that I wished to address and the untold stories I had hoped to convey.

'*We are not in a prison; we are in a school where kids and teenagers not only need to feel love but express it to each other. Everyone knows that love is important to education but love is also important to life. You have to love yourself but also love others, and the school brings that*.' – Student

A few days before handing in my dissertation, I am still prone to conflicted feelings on the story I decided to narrate. Going through my data and field memories, I know in my heart and from what I observed that if education is a means to understand who we are, then I believe that an education that touches all aspects of human experience is necessary.

Chapter 8. Conclusion

Through this study, I experienced the gift of people in sharing with me their thoughtful appraisal on their educational journey. The collection of the ideas depicted in the interlude show that my experience was much more than what is recollected in this dissertation. That said, there are important things to take from this piece of work.

I have first investigated the concepts of HolEd theoretically, through which fieldwork clearly demonstrated that HolEd 'does not mean anything' when not contextualised. Working towards good education (Biesta) might be enhanced by HoldEd. A holistic perspective is not a methodological tool, it is rather a way of being, seeing and intuiting, associated with practical methods, and structure; yet it is not a perfect way either. Throughout my research, I have chosen to depict a rather critical image of holistic approaches when these are instrumentalised or left unchallenged. I have questioned the creative and innovative pedagogy which might not be the primary cause of the school's success, but perhaps this success is a result of the love and consistency given by teachers to their students. For instance, Amriti provided a valuable perspective into this relationship dynamic, bringing to life the subjectification dimension (Biesta, 2009); her beliefs and practises of teaching aimed to engage students in a dialectical conversation around their reading of the world.

The messiness and complexity of education occurring at the heart of the classroom clearly disrupted totalising theories and rigid educational views and by teasing out these complexities, I emphasised tensions and how they played out within alternative ways of education. I have considered that if HolEd might seem to be the answer it remains a system, thus, exposed to vulnerabilities and dysfunctions. There is no perfect system. Rather than defending one as such, actively questioning the strengths, weaknesses, set of values, beliefs, and philosophies behind it, could create a more authentic community; one that emancipates. Thus, to embrace a reflexive and open-minded stance, echoing the very essence of HolEd and our imperfect, ever-changing self, might therefore create changes in students' educational lives and futures in a more conscious way. In turn, following Biesta (2013), this attitude would prevent a stagnant vision of what education should look like and embrace the beautiful risk that it upholds.

I started this dissertation eager to uncover the promises that HolEd may offer. I remain hopeful about the infinite possibilities that holistic methods hold in guiding children to the depth of their being in dialogue with alterity. For that, I believe the school, as a whole, must embark on a dialogical journey into the aims and means of education, open to confrontations and willingness to challenge fixed ideas in order to epitomise what the school aspires its students to become: purposeful agents of change. And for that, education needs time.

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Appendix

University of Glasgow | School of Education

29th March 2019

Dear Juliette,

School of Education Research Ethics Committee

Project Title: A Holistic Approach to Education: A Case Study On [redacted]

Application No: 402180095

The School of Education Research Ethics Committee has reviewed your application and has agreed that there is no objection on ethical grounds to the proposed study. It is happy therefore to approve the project, subject to the following conditions:

- Start date of ethical approval: 01/04/19
- Project end date: 05/12/19
- Any outstanding permissions needed from third parties in order to recruit research participants or to access facilities or venues for research purposes must be obtained in writing and submitted to the School of Education Research Ethics Administrator before research commences. Permissions you must provide are shown in the reviewer feedback form, titled *Notification of Ethics Application Outcome*, that has been sent to you.
- Data collected should be held securely for the period you indicated in the application and any personal data collected should be appropriately managed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation.
- The research should be carried out only on the sites, and/or with the groups and using the methods defined in the application.
- Any proposed changes in the protocol should be submitted for reassessment as an amendment to the original application. The *Request for Amendments to an Approved Application* form should be used: https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/education/research/ethics/forms/

Yours sincerely,

Dr Kara Makara
School of Education Ethics Officer

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