

# Integral Intelligence: A 21 Century Necessity

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**Abstract:** This article explores the critical role education plays in the attitudes, behaviors, results produced, and ultimately our every day experiences of our world. Integral education is introduced as a catalyst for transformation, moving our emphasis in education from gathering knowledge to growing consciousness. Expanding awareness provides a paradigm shift from epistemology to ontology, which would fundamentally alter where our attention is focused, from having and doing to being—providing an opening to directly experience ourselves as the creators of our reality.

**Keywords:** complexity, epistemology, inquiry, integral education, integral intelligence, integral worldview, ontology, paradigm, transformation, wisdom, vicious cycle, virtuous cycle.

## Introduction

The intent of this article is to utilize an integral viewpoint to look at our world and bring a quality of awareness that has yet to be fully distinguished. An integral perspective is committed to weave together the seemingly isolated, fragmented and disconnected phenomena that take place in our world, in a manner that allows for seeing with new eyes. It encircles horizontally and is at the same time deeply rooted vertically. When people experience and understand how different occurrences *connect* together to create a full picture, it changes the way they think, act, speak, and listen, and the way they view the world—a larger picture becomes apparent and their relationship to that image is made clearer.

A number of areas will be addressed in the following pages regarding the current educational approach in the United States and the quality of the world it creates and perpetuates, as seen from various vantage points, e.g., scholars, educators, students. Integral Education is presented as a model of our future education with its commitment to *educating for* an integral worldview.

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## Quality of Education = Quality of World

The premise of this paper is: *we get what we educate*. The world we live in, feel, and observe around us is directly correlated to our educational experiences. What is happening in our world and our responses to it, whether it is close—as in family, friends, school, community or city—or farther away—as in state, nation, region or globe—reflects the context, content and practices of our education. The focus of this article is an inquiry into the nature of our world and the impact our way of educating has on that world. The United States and its approach to education are highlighted and extrapolations can be made to other countries.

This article is an invitation to its readers to an inquiry of the highest order: to engage in questions around the quality of world being created by the kind of education we are providing ourselves and our young people. If our education is the foundation for our future, what is the quality of future we are living into given our current approach to education? What is going on in our world, in business, in our communities, in our religious institutions, and throughout our educational institutions... in our collective consciousness, how we think, the quality of that thinking, how we feel, about ourselves and each other, the way we relate to one another, what we think is important, our values, etc.?

There is an active conversation among educators, scientists, policy makers, the media, parents, government, and business people about the role education should play in preparing people to live successfully in a complex world. Practitioners in many disciplines are divided over this role, and offer an either/or approach; e.g., either “we must produce more graduates in science, math and technology,” or “simply adding analytical skills to traditional curricula would be wholly insufficient to convey a general understanding of complex phenomena;” or “modern sciences fail to acknowledge the complexity of the real world, and foster a misleading certainty of expectations that leads people to pursue simple solutions for complex problems, and to discount contrarian ideas and ‘inconvenient truths’” (Abeles, 2010, pp. 2-3).

Our world is increasing in complexity exponentially. It involves many intricate parts that require an ability to make linkages; e.g., bringing the seemingly unrelated to a place of relationship and connection. This complexity of new technologies, diverse cultures/belief systems intermingling, internet/information access, media proliferation, international economic and political interdependencies; globalization of businesses, cultures, awareness, connections; the reinvention of the family constellation, education, politics, religions, and so on, has multifaceted everything. “Our culture is in a constant state of change and evolution” (Robinson, 2001, p.176).

The 21<sup>st</sup> century complex world demands an integral approach, one that encompasses seeming paradoxes with a both/and viewpoint—a complete transformation of our established epistemology. A new paradigm is required now which is gradually emerging, representing the beginnings of a true transformation in the way we think and act. Susanne Langer, an American scholar of the philosophy of mind, captures it with this imagery:

A new idea is a light that illuminates things that simply had no form for us before the light fell on them and gave them meaning. We turn the light here, there, and everywhere the limits of thought recede before it” (as cited in Robinson, 2001, p. 73).

The intent of this paper is to shine that quality of light on our world today.

## The Void in Education

Sri Aurbindo, the Indian spiritual philosopher, educator, and activist saw the evolutionary turmoil humankind was undergoing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his writings and teachings he spoke about the quality of society being manifest: “Man has created a system of civilization which has become too big for his limited mental capacity and understanding and his still more limited spiritual and moral capacity to utilize and manage” (Ghose, 1976, pp. 1053-1055).

Three decades later he is echoed by Ervin Laszlo, a philosopher of science, a systems and evolution theorist, and integral thinker. “We are in a spiritual crisis at the moment. We need to upgrade and update our consciousness. Our technology has evolved faster than our spirits have; we need a spiritual revolution” (Laszlo, 2005).

Peter Senge (2004), an MIT professor, system theorist, and consultant to businesses, adds his agreement in his most recent book, *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*, “...the industrial age school continues to expand, largely unaffected by the realities of children growing up in the present day” (p. 7). The task of encouraging thoughtful, knowledgeable, compassionate global citizens in the twenty-first century is not being addressed consistently with the world we are living into. These educator/scholars are joined by many other voices.

Robert J. Sternberg, professor of psychology and education at Yale University and director of its Center for the Psychology of Abilities, Competencies, and Expertise, is committed to educating for wisdom:.

I do believe that we need to rethink our goals in education. Increased academic skills may be necessary for many kinds of success, but they are not sufficient. Students need something more. We need to teach students not only knowledge but also how to use that knowledge well, e.g., thinking wisely and encouraging students to develop their own values while understanding multiple points of view. Teaching for wisdom recognizes that there are certain values—honesty, sincerity, doing toward others as you would have them do toward you—that are shared the world over by the great ethical systems of many cultures. (Sternberg, 2002, pp. 1-3)

Sternberg also stresses balance: “students learn to include their own interests with those of others and those of larger entities, like their school, their community, their country, even God” (p. 2).

Sir Ken Robinson, author, speaker, and international advisor on education, also “challenges the way we’re educating our children and champions a radical rethink of our school systems, to cultivate creativity and acknowledge multiple types of intelligence” (Robinson, 2010). One of his major contributions is continuing to explore the importance of creativity in the educational

system and its link to the economy of a country. To the question, “Why don't we get the best out of people?” he retorts:

It's because we've been educated to become good workers, rather than creative thinkers. Students with restless minds and bodies—far from being cultivated for their energy and curiosity—are ignored or even stigmatized, with terrible consequences. We are educating people out of their creativity. (Robinson, 2010, Ted Talks).

## Uncovering Vicious Cycles

A vicious cycle is a complex series of events, which reinforces itself through feedback loops. Each iteration of the cycle reinforces the previous sequence, ultimately leading to detrimental results. It is a situation in which the solution to one problem creates a chain of problems, each making it more difficult to solve the original one. The cycle will continue in the direction of its momentum until an external factor intervenes and breaks the series. Our current way of educating has created many vicious cycles. Inquiring into our system of education is about shining a bright enough light so the unseen can be given the quality of form necessary to illuminate the meaning sufficiently to unravel the vicious cycle.

In 2011, the world we live in is no longer rooted in the economic model of industrialism and the intellectual model of academicism. Both are outdated and inadequate to what is needed today (Robinson, 2001, p. 23). This leads to an education curriculum that is separated from the real world and less relevant to being successful in the real world. And, everything inside this vicious cycle, e.g., the teachers, administrators, parents, students and the public, more often than not, continues to reinforce one another.

Teachers teach inside of, and are assessed using criteria within, this outmoded paradigm; parents want their children to succeed inside this outmoded paradigm, schools and universities want funding inside this outmoded paradigm, students either want to achieve and continue in the outmoded paradigm, or they drop out in many different forms, which is becoming more often the case, e.g., from 23% in 1969, to 31% in 2007—46% of black students, 44% Latinos, and 49% Native American did not graduate in recent years (Khadaroo, 2010).

The public often continues the cycle with ignorance, denial, confusion, complacency, reactivity and/or righteousness. As Mahler puts it:

...false dichotomies seem to have replaced fruitful conversation.  
If you support the teachers union, you don't care about the students.  
If you are critical of the teachers union, you don't care about the teachers.  
If you are in favor of charter schools, you are opposed to public schools.  
If you believe in increased testing, you are on board with the corruption of our liberal society's most cherished values.  
If you are against increased testing, you are against accountability.  
It goes on and on. Neither side seems capable of listening to the other. (Mahler, 2011, p. 9)

Trying to change things inside of a disintegrating paradigm provides nothing; the system needs to be reinvented (Robinson, 2001).

Because of its nature, the vicious cycle is very difficult to see or grasp. There are so many “feedback loops, with each iteration of the cycle reinforcing the previous,” it acts like a haze that covers what is there ...it seems impossible to really get one’s hands around it sufficiently to get the traction to take definitive action, e.g., “academics gets confused with education and qualifications with abilities” (Robinson, 2001, p. 57). “The high-stakes testing movement, for example, seems to emphasize knowledge acquisition much more than the socially desirable use of that knowledge” (Sternberg, 2002, p. 2).

There are very deeply seated beliefs, assumptions, and values, which stem from before the Renaissance about what it means to be educated and which we continue to take for granted—we come to think of our views of this reality as, “the way it is” or “common sense.” “The relationships between our education and the world we actually live in are being stretched to breaking point and they need now to be entirely rethought” (Robinson, 2001, p. 93).

Vicious cycles also show up in how we value our education, the amount of money we are willing to pay our key influencers of our children’s educational experiences; we allow mediocrity to go unaccounted for, e.g., the lack of interest in creating mutual accountability throughout our educational institutions. We spend more money on prisons than schools, “six times the amount” (Lehrer, 2011) and we compensate our professional sports players abundantly more (between 3 and 20 times) than the keepers of the keys to our future. We fund weaponry and wars before excellence in education. At least 200 billion dollars more is spent on war than education (Conetta, 2010) & (US Department of Education, 2010). These examples all indicate a way of thinking that is worthy of our inquiry.

How do we relate to our media and the role it plays in creating our educational experience of our world? Watching television, entertainment, sports and music events, advertising, listening to radio...what is the quality of the communications to people? What “world” are they creating? How well do these mediums continue the vicious cycle? Where does the cycle start ...and end, or does it ever? Is it our education which brings us to thinking in a particular way, or is it our culture, our families, our government, politics, religious affiliations, the media, ...”the way everyone else thinks,” that has us believe that this is the way it should be? Is this a great example of the vicious cycle in action? Our education and our culture continually reinforce each other without external intervening factors that break the cycle.

## **Current US Education Approach**

Tony Wagner, past Director of the Change Leadership Group at Harvard University’s graduate school of education and author of the seminal book, *The Global Achievement Gap*, addresses many vicious cycles in education. His book is filled with data from interviews with teachers, students, parents, and business people, and observations of schools and university teacher education classrooms. He spent time in the “best” schools with the highest SAT scores and found students more focused on a “right answer” than creative reflection and serious inquiry. J. King, an MIT professor remarked about students who have top scores in Advanced Placement

courses, “They don’t know how to *observe*.” When asked to describe what they see, “They want to know what they should be looking for—what the right answer is” (Wagner, 2008, p. 7).

Deborah Meier, professor at NYU’s Steinhardt School of Education agrees: “We’ve also left precious little space in school for our youngsters to ask serious questions that have no “right” or “wrong” answers” (Meier, 2010). The mood in the classrooms Wagner observed was mechanical, students unreflective and rigid in their responses to questions. Teachers were teaching to a “core curriculum,” (standardized tests) with much memorization, methods that “are quickly becoming an epidemic in our nation’s schools” (Wagner, 2008, p. 59).

Students’ relationship with learning felt stilted, linear, and detached. Diane Ravitch, Research Professor in Education at NYU and educational historian adds her agreement to that of Wagner, Meier, Sternberg, and Robinson cited above, “The schools will surely be failures if students graduate knowing how to choose the right option from four bubbles on a test, but unprepared to lead fulfilling lives, to be responsible citizens, and to make good choices for themselves, their families, and our society” (Ravitch, 2010, p. 1).

Stephanie Pace Marshall, internationally acknowledged educator, in her book *The Power to Transform*, critiques the current approach to education in the United States by asserting that our current patterns, processes, and structures of schooling are not designed to ignite our children’s joy, intellectual energy, and imagination. She believes that this is because they are conceived and framed within a context of scarcity, deficiency, and fragmentation, rather than a dynamic or integrative approach that would enable our children to engage with passion in exploring their real questions about life (Marshall, 2006).

Teacher education is another major contributor to the vicious cycle. Arthur Levine, the former president of Columbia University Teachers’ College, in two highly influential studies of teacher education, found many students graduate without the skills and knowledge they need to be effective teachers. Sixty-two percent of responses, (alumni and students) report schools of education do not prepare their graduates to cope with the realities of today’s classrooms. According to Levine,

...education school faculty’s lack understanding of the current challenges in schools and classrooms....the experience of faculty were not recent or long enough,... lessons are often out of date, are more theoretical than practical, thin in content. The curriculum is often fractured, with a lack of continuity from one course to the next, and [there is] insufficient integration between course work and field work. The schools foster docility with too many lecture courses and too few opportunities for problem solving and original thinking. (Levine, as cited in Wagner, 2008, pp. 145-146)

Students in our schools are taught by people who are educated in a “teacher-education curriculum that is a confusing patchwork, with academic instruction and everyday issues disconnected” (Wagner, 2008, p. 148). This is the ultimate of the vicious cycle. “Take a disjointed collection of course of uneven quality and then pass tests that rarely measure the skills that matter the most” (p. 148). Add to that, “close to fifty percent of the teachers in the United

States come from the bottom third of college classes and teacher compensation is much lower than other professions graduates can choose” (Jones, 2011, p. 33).

Levine also looked into the educating of school principals, including those programs at Harvard and Columbia, and concluded that ...

The core curricula of the nation’s principals are a random collection of courses. ...a grab bag of courses... If one removed the class on the principalship from the list, it would be a real challenge to guess the purpose of the program. (as cited in Wagner, 2008, pp. 147-148)

Wagner (2001), in his research of education in the United States, distinguished four major themes, which provide more powerful examples of the vicious cycle and how it manifests, often subtly, in our educational institutions and ultimately in our “educated” populace. The culture of our education creates and perpetuates reactivity, compliance, isolation, and no real sense of accountability. Educators have to react to a cacophony of urgent needs and demands

Every day. We can’t say no, and everything is a priority. Most of us haven’t developed the discipline of reflection as a way to remain focused on the truly important. The education culture has tended to reward compliance to authority at all levels over active questioning or genuine discussion of issues. School district leadership rewards compliance rather than creativity and initiative.

Educators work alone more than any other professionals in modern America. Most professions have come to recognize the value of teamwork as a better way to understand and solve ‘problems of practice.’ Groups are far more likely to come to a deeper understanding, and to better solutions, than are individuals working alone, no matter how talented.... Broad ‘ownership’ of the problem a school or district needs to solve is rare in compliance-driven change efforts, where concern for positive PR trumps true public engagement and unfavorable data are downplayed.... To be effective, however, accountability has to be two-way and horizontal as well as vertical. What is our reciprocal and relational accountability to one another. (Wagner, 2001, pp. 1-6)

## **A New Educational Paradigm: Creating Virtuous Cycles**

That intelligence plays an epistemological role in our education is a universally accepted premise. The idea that intelligence plays an ontological role as well represents a transformation in the purpose of education. Ontology is the study of the nature of being, i.e., one’s essential nature, the nature of reality. Acknowledging the importance of an ontological framework for education shifts its primary intention and attention from *knowing* to *being*. If accepted, this expanded interpretation qualitatively alters how we relate to education.

Emphasis transfers from *knowing* first, to *being* first—recognizing that who one is *being* in the process of *knowing*, is senior to what one *knows* in the process of *being*. What is suggested in this thinking is that including the nature of being and reality at the beginning of the process of

knowing would substantially alter the quality of knowing occurring and the subsequent actions taken as a result of that knowing.

An example might be that when one brings a sense of wholeness and integration *of* one's experiences of the physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental intelligences, the learning occurs inside of a worldview that is capable of generating a paradigm of connection, relatedness and integration, i.e., both/and, rather than separateness and isolation, i.e., either/or. This way of viewing the world provides a very different learning context than that of dichotomizing, competing, winning, losing, e.g., either you or me... either them or us. Both the philosophical and pragmatic aspects of education represent the creation of our essential nature and our relationship with reality. Integral education has the potential to transform our essential natures and our experience of what is real.

## Integral Education

Integral education is an approach to education that provides a powerful foundation for living life and preparing people to live in a complex and ever changing world. In this model, the first 18 years of a person's life are focused on developing and integrating the physical, spiritual, emotional and mental intelligences. From a very early age, young people learn to relate to the world with an integral worldview. Thus, the introduction to the adult phase of their life is grounded in educational experiences which have interwoven these powerful expressions of human consciousness. The focus is foremost on the ontological aspects of intelligence, i.e., the *being* of the human being, which in turn provides a life altering context in which learning occurs.

The living of one's life is viewed through the lens of wholeness and relationship: connection to oneself, others and all of nature as an *embodied* phenomenon. This is an education *for* wholeness in a human being. Wholeness does not mean perfection. It means "becoming more real by acknowledging the whole of who I am" (Palmer, 1998, p. 13).

Physical intelligence is seen as *fundamental* to an integral education experience. There is an acknowledgement of the essential relationship between biology (earth), chemistry (foods, substances), and physics (energy) at the core of this approach to education. There is "groundedness," consciousness, and connection with the natural elements. There is a tacit form of knowledge in bodily knowledge (Adams, 2006). "The clues that allow us to know anything come from our relatedness to reality—a relatedness as deep as the atoms our bodies share with everything that is, ever has been, or ever will be" (Palmer, 1998, p. 98).

This embodiment of the physical has ontological implications. It communicates a particular reality and way of being that introduces students to what is real for them; what is real for them is in their body, in their experiences, and senses. It also has epistemological connotations. What and how these students know as a grounded embodied individual influences the way they relate to knowledge; it is relevant to them on a very basic level. It is learning that is connected on many layers—energetic, cellular, muscular, sensory, and kinesthetic (Adams, 2006).

The emotional intelligence plays a *relational* role in integral education. Connections are seen throughout. People are in community; they are in communication, with themselves and each



other; they are caring and cared for; they are learning the skills to remain in community and communication, e.g., conflict resolution, dialogue, and mediation. Focus is placed on the experiences of safety, belonging, relationship, love, being known, self-expressed, responsible, service and mentorship of others to support the development of emotional intelligence in everyone, e.g., students, teachers, parents, etc.

This relational pattern in the emotional domain has ontological implications. It communicates a particular reality and way of being that introduces students to what is “real” for them; *they are related*. It also has epistemological connotations. What and how these students know as relational individuals influences the way they interact with what they are learning. What they are learning *is connected to them*. What is being learned is not separate or disjointed; it is *related to them* (Adams, 2006).

At a conference hosted by The Mind Life Institute, and attended by close to 4,000 participants from around the globe, with scholars, educators and a number of deans from major American schools of education (e.g., Harvard University, University of Michigan, Stanford, Pennsylvania State University, Rice University, University of Wisconsin, Carnegie Foundation), the major conference theme was developing emotional intelligence in our populace, e.g., “the education of hearts as well as minds; socio-emotional development; compassion and empathy; and generating authentic relationships. Experience based learning; belonging, caring, community, sense of mastery, responsibility, owning one’s own power, generosity etc...” (Mind Life Institute, 2009).

The *natural* role of the mental domain is respected in the integral curriculum. Mental intelligence is known to expand in an environment in which students are encouraged to love learning, be curious, and follow their passion. When the learner is respected, trusted, and honored as an individual and educated to think and learn for him/herself, given choices and responsibility for what is studied, the *natural* quality of learning is activated.

Students exposed to curriculum that is experiential and relevant can embody the content and the context. The growth of mental acumen is equated with trusting the human being in his/her natural quest of learning. There is a recognition that the purpose of education is to provide an environment in which the inherent attributes of the individual can *naturally* grow and take root. If the context is known and the learning is relevant, the learner can also be at choice and responsible for her/his education.

The inferences from these interpretations are valuable when considered from an ontological perspective. The reality is—humans have a *natural* love of learning and curiosity that only requires room to express and grow; children can be responsible and trusted with their own education. Who we are as human beings at the most fundamental level are *natural* learners. Epistemologically, these interpretations offer an essential shift away from current educational practices. They suggest the *natural* aspects of learning - learning belongs to the individual (Adams, 2006).

Modern brain research shows clearly that children are natural learners. They are born wanting to learn and would continue being voracious learners if they were in an environment that is truly learner centered. They need the kind of learning environment that

is not a system, but which enables them to find the help and information THEY need and ask for. They need adults around them who respect them as individuals, know how to listen to them and can help guide them to the resources they need. (Mintz, 2011, p. 1, emphasis in the original)

Spiritual intelligence plays a *contextual* role in integral education. It gives a sense of congruency to life. Students are educated in ways that their sense of “spirit” can show up in their lives, i.e., seeing themselves in relation to a larger world, feeling connected to themselves, others, and nature. The holistic approach provides practices to support individuals getting more related to themselves and others through internal experiences such as contemplation, self-reflection, journaling, silent time, meditation, yoga, exercises, etc. The integral curriculum includes understanding and honoring the world’s religions, learning the distinction between spirituality and religion and having clarifying conversations that bring people together and promote interfaith inclusion rather than exclusion and derisiveness. In addition, key to developing an integral point of view is discovering the connection of science and spirituality—to experience the awe in both expressions of “spirit” (Adams, 2006).

The ontological inferences from addressing the spiritual intelligence in an integral education are immense. Reality takes on an inclusive nature, a both/and quality as opposed to the either/or dualism that has been engrained in our current educational reality, that we so often take for granted as the way it is. How students relate to one another is more from appreciative inquiry and understanding throughout their education. Epistemologically, knowledge is recognized for its multifaceted quality. All sides are presented. Students are educated to take multiple points of view and experience what it is like to be in the shoes of the other. The whole and the parts are seen in *relationship* with one another. Analysis and synthesis and the subjective and objective brought together yield a different quality of knowledge and understanding and an opening for wisdom to appear. “Wisdom is a quality of ‘seeing’ and relating to life that reflects an ability to synthesize its disparate aspects. Wisdom mirrors wholeness—as it reveals all sides” (Adams, 2006, p. 353).

## Conclusion

What kind of world do you want to live in? When you listen to the news and read papers and magazines, what kind of narratives do you want to represent you and the world you are creating? The world we live in and the future we are living into are up to us. How might your worldview shift to move from ways of being that are separating, isolating and fragmenting yourself and others, to ways of being that are connecting, relating and integrating for yourself and others. What can you do or say or who can you ‘be’ that will begin unraveling the existing vicious cycles and start creating many more virtuous cycles. Let’s own our future together.

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