



Nurturing the Village: The Future of Education through Holistic Relationships

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EDUCATION, IN ITS ESSENCE, is an interconnected web of relationships. It is within this web that "Nurturing the Village: The Future of Education through Holistic Relationships" situates its discourse. This article serves as an introductory overview of the foundational elements required to cultivate a relational model of education, deeply rooted in Neohumanist principles. Here, we propose an educational framework where the core values of empathy, compassion, and interconnectedness are not peripheral but central to the learning experience.

As we embark on this journey, we acknowledge the profound statements by James Comer ("No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship") and George Washington Carver (that "All learning is understanding relationships"), which remind us that significant learning is deeply entwined with significant relationships. It is these relationships that shape not only the academic but also the emotional and social fibers of our students. By fostering an environment where every member of the educational ecosystem collaborates, we create a village in the truest sense—one that holistically nurtures the child to flourish as a well-rounded member of society.

This article aims to outline the imperative for a shift from traditional educational paradigms to one that is relational at its core. It will argue that the future of education lies in the strength and quality of the relationships formed between students, educators, families, and the wider community. Following this piece, a series of articles will further delve into these concepts, offering a deeper exploration of how Neohumanistic philosophy can be interwoven into the fabric of educational models to equip our students for the complexities of the modern world.

In the fabric of education, the quality of interactions among all participants—students, teachers, parents, and the broader community—determines the effectiveness of learning. This network of relationships embodies the proverbial village necessary for raising a child holistically. For decades, the profound impact of these relationships on our well-being and success has been well-documented, yet their incorporation into educational systems has lagged.

The village is not a mere metaphor but a network of living, breathing relationships that form the backbone of a child's development. It encapsulates a holistic approach where learning extends beyond academic metrics to the

emotional and social growth of the individual. In this village, every member plays a critical role in the collective endeavor of education, be it through imparting wisdom, providing support, or fostering a nurturing environment.

However, there remains a stark gap in acknowledging the significance of these relationships in the realm of education. Some, like Rita Pierson, and myself, have faced criticism for advocating a relational approach, labeled as 'Kumbayá'—yet it is precisely this compassionate approach that can transform educational paradigms. Relationships are not soft skills; they are the foundation upon which students build the resilience and confidence to navigate life's challenges.

Despite the successes of relational approaches, educational reforms often prioritize prescriptive methodologies, relegating the relational aspects to the periphery. This focus on curriculum and assessment fails to address the diverse needs of children and the evolving social context. The result is an array of disjointed reforms that fail to enhance student achievement, contributing to a cycle of disenfranchisement rather than upliftment.

Additionally, the drive to reform schools to combat poverty must be reimagined to account for the significant social shifts that have occurred since the inception of the current educational model. The dissolution of the nuclear family, unsafe living conditions, and the fragmentation of communities necessitate a reevaluation of the role education plays in society. Teachers are often expected to address a wide array of societal issues, a task far beyond the scope of the classroom.

In places like New Orleans, a singular focus on school improvement has had mixed results. While there are gains in test scores, the approach has weakened community bonds and failed to address the systemic issues students face, such as violence and incarceration. The emphasis on academic achievement has overshadowed the need for a robust support system that acknowledges the complex realities of students' lives (Carr, 2013).

To forge a path forward, we must recognize that the village extends beyond the school walls. It requires the active participation of all community members in the educational process. Teachers must be supported in their role to honor and leverage the diverse cultural



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backgrounds of their students. Mutual respect and understanding between teachers and students are paramount for fostering an environment where children feel valued and are motivated to learn.

The village concept must be revitalized to incorporate the principles of Neohumanistic Education, in which the development of the whole person is paramount. By doing so, we can begin to address the cultural dysfunctions that hinder our collective progress and create educational environments that truly prepare students to be agents of change in an interconnected world.

The future of education hinges on the strength of our relationships. It is through these bonds that we can nurture the holistic development of individuals who are not only academically proficient but also emotionally intelligent, empathetic, and socially conscious. The village, in its truest sense, is a tapestry of relationships that, when woven together with intention and care, creates a resilient and vibrant educational landscape for all.

Nurturing the Village: The Heart of Holistic Education

In the pursuit of educational excellence, we often laud the dedication of teachers and school personnel, tasking them with the monumental job of fostering self-worth and self-confidence in students. These are the very qualities that underpin a learner's desire to succeed, paving the

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way for the development of diligence and determination essential for thriving in educational settings. Yet, if we genuinely subscribe to the adage that "it takes a village to raise a child," we must critically examine why the burden often falls disproportionately on teachers. It feels as if they reside alone in this 'village,' shouldering the bulk of work and responsibility that, by rights, should be distributed among many. Teachers frequently become the scapegoats for the systemic failings of education, despite their relentless efforts. The question looms large: where are the other villagers in this educational community?

The 'village' is not merely a network of individuals who exist within the educational sphere; it is a collective that must actively engage in nurturing our youth. The relationships that bind this village are the conduits through which education can transform society, moving beyond mere academic achievements to cultivate a generation that embodies the principles of harmony, love, and empathy towards all beings. This holistic educational approach emphasizes the centrality of interhuman relationships, as well as the connection between humans and the broader natural environment, recognizing that a cohesive village is essential for nurturing children who are intellectually proficient and emotionally and socially well-rounded.

Teaching and learning extend far beyond the transmission of facts. They entail presenting intricate knowledge in relatable ways, posing thought-provoking questions, navigating uncertainties, and forging strong relationships with students and their families. It involves collaboration with professionals from various fields and adapting to the diverse abilities and backgrounds of each student. In essence, it's

about engaging in dynamic, continuous relationships that form the bedrock of a transformative educational experience.

Yet, there persists a notion among some educators and the public that certain individuals are undeserving of positive relationships due to their identity, past actions, or a belief that efforts to forge such connections will be futile. This mindset is counterproductive and denies the fundamental human need for respect and connection.

One of my most poignant experiences with the transformative power of relationships occurred within the walls of Walpole (maximum security) State Prison in Massachusetts. As a young observer hired to mitigate tensions following a destructive riot, I interacted with inmates labeled as 'hardened criminals' without preconceptions, treating them with the same dignity and respect I would accord anyone else. This approach unexpectedly led to one of the most hardened inmates selecting me to teach a sociology class, simply because I treated them as human beings. This powerful moment exemplified that even in the most challenging environments, positive relationships can break through the toughest exteriors, fostering a sense of respect and a desire to learn and grow.

The efficacy of relational approaches in a maximum-security prison underscores their potential in educational settings across the board—from early childhood to higher education. If such an approach can have a profound impact on those deemed the most unreachable, it can undoubtedly resonate with students at all stages of their educational journey.

As social beings, our relationships are vital to our physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. They allow us to evolve and imbue our lives with



deeper meaning. This is particularly true in the educational realm, where the relationships between teachers and students, parents and schools, and among students themselves, are pivotal. Positive relationships enhance academic and social engagement, leading to better academic outcomes and a nurturing learning environment.

What, then, constitutes healthy, positive, and beneficial relationships within the educational village? The answer lies in a holistic approach that recognizes the multifaceted nature of human connections and the diverse needs of the community. Positive relational dynamics are characterized by mutual respect, empathy, and a commitment to the collective growth of all members of the village.

As we delve deeper, we will explore the nuances of these relationships, particularly in the context of hunter-gatherer societies, and discuss their implications for contemporary education in future articles. We will set forth foundational principles that outline the basic characteristics, processes, and objectives of nurturing the educational village. It is through this comprehensive understanding that we can re-

envision education as a holistic journey that fully prepares individuals to contribute meaningfully to society.

Teacher-Student Relationships: Cultivating the Village for Holistic Development

The essence of the teacher-student relationship lies at the heart of the educational journey—a journey that must be paved with safety, trust, and mutual respect to be truly transformative. In creating an environment where students feel secure enough to be candid and honest without fear of retribution, educators lay the groundwork for a nurturing, interactive, and cooperative space.

Initial steps toward building trust can be as simple as engaging in honest and open dialogue, listening without judgment or a predefined agenda. By doing so, teachers validate the students' voices, prioritizing their contributions over the urge to steer every conversation towards a didactic endpoint. Educators who share their own curiosities and acknowledge their areas for growth model a learning posture that respects

and elevates the student's role in the educational exchange. This approach, endorsed by Damon's emphasis on content mastery, serves as a foundation without overshadowing the importance of relational dynamics (Damon, N. 2018).

When students feel heard and valued, they become more inclined to open up and communicate, which in turn fosters a more profound engagement with the learning process. A respectful and caring relationship between teachers and students is not just about content delivery; it embodies a reciprocal learning attitude that allows the flow of knowledge and discovery to move in both directions. Acknowledging that educators do not hold all the answers and that both teachers and students can learn in concert enriches the educational experience, transforming it into a partnership of willing participants focused on shared objectives rather than rigid methodologies.

Research underscores the need for students to feel connected to their school community, encompassing peer relationships and a sense of belonging that reinforces self-esteem and well-being. Such connections lead to happier, healthier students and, consequently, better scholastic outcomes. Constructive and encouraging relationships, as Hattie (2009) highlights, can significantly impact student achievement, igniting enthusiasm and self-confidence.

Conversely, negative interactions can lead to disengagement and apathy. When children face verbal aggression or punitive measures from their educators, it can incite stress, tension, and anxiety, impeding their social-emotional development and hindering the learning process. Chronic stress from such environments can catalyze long-term detrimental changes in the brain, contributing to a spectrum of mental health issues, including depression and mood disorders (Kaufert, et al.; Sanders, University of California – Berkeley, 2014; Mayo Clinic staff, April 28, 2016).

My personal journey through the U S education system as a young Spanish-speaking

immigrant vividly illustrates the profound influence that teacher-student relationships can have on a child's development. For instance, Andrés, an 18-year-old who joined my second-grade class, was deemed 'slow' because he had not acquired sufficient English since his arrival from Puerto Rico. Without bilingual education programs available, the prevailing 'sink or swim' philosophy did little to accommodate his linguistic needs.

Andrés's journey in our classroom stands out as a poignant testament to the power of relationships in education. His struggles with English were mistakenly interpreted as a lack of intelligence, yet my conversations with him in Spanish revealed a mind deeply attuned to the human condition. Andrés was a visionary who shared captivating stories that wove together the moral threads of trust, self-discipline, and friendship.

His wit and narrative flair initially filled our classroom with laughter and learning.

However, an unfortunate incident marked the beginning of a harsh transformation. A misunderstanding led to a severe and unjust reprimand from Sister Relendes, our teacher, whose diminutive stature was inversely proportional to her fierce demeanor.

One day in class, Andrés's attention was caught by a classmate peering into a large box at the back of the room. Moved by curiosity, he approached and peered inside, only to find it marred by an unexpected sight of spit. As he pondered the reason behind such an act, Sister Relendes, our teacher whose demeanor was as sharp as her temper, entered the room. Spotting Andrés by the box, she rushed over, and upon seeing its contents, hastily concluded that he was the perpetrator. Her reaction was swift and severe: she lashed out at Andrés, berating him with harsh words and physical reprimands, labeling him with unkind and unjust names: "big, fat, dumb, stupid idiot" (Torre, unpublished manuscript). Andrés, in a state of shock and fear, recoiled, trying in vain to shield himself from her unfounded fury.



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Witnessing Andrés shrink under her scathing words was a harrowing experience for us all. It shattered the humor and intelligence that had once defined him, leaving behind a shadow of the vibrant person he once was.

The change in Andrés was palpable as his previously lively stories became confused and his once quick humor turned into something almost unrecognizable. A part of the spirit that had so captivated us seemed to have been lost. The once-resilient Andrés became increasingly withdrawn, and his health appeared to decline alongside his attendance.

The final goodbye from Andrés was as subdued as his recent demeanor had been, marked with a melancholy that was deeply unsettling. After that day, the absence of his presence was a silent void that spoke volumes about the impact negative educational experiences can have on a student's life. The loss of Andrés from our classroom was a profound reminder of the delicate nature of a child's psyche and the lasting consequences of our interactions with them. His story serves as a clarion call for empathy, understanding, and support in the way we educate and relate to one another.

In my own educational journey, not being fluent in English upon entering the school system resulted in my being placed a year behind, in the first grade. However, with time and effort, my grasp of the language strengthened. Within months, I was able to hold conversations in English and felt increasingly confident in my ability to soon speak fluently.

Yet, an unforgettable incident on the school playground would challenge this confidence. Sister Relendes, our stern and formidable teacher, misinterpreted a linguistic error I made as a sign of incompetence. When I attempted to explain that a classmate, Billy, had fallen and torn his pants, my mispronunciation of 'hole' as 'roll' drew her ire. She glared at me with disdain and

sharply criticized my English, suggesting someone else with better language skills should relay messages to her. More specifically: "Why don't you let someone who can speak decently come and tell me?" (ibid.). This humiliating experience left an indelible mark, reinforcing the critical importance of patience and understanding in educational settings.

Sister Relendes's harsh words and demeaning attitude left an indelible mark, instilling a fear of authority figures and a questioning of my own worth and cultural identity. This experience laid bare the damaging effects that negative reinforcement from educators can have on a child's psyche and educational experience.

It's critical to acknowledge that children, especially those under seven, are often unable to discern the veracity of adults' statements, leading to a deep internalization of their words and actions. The emotional weight of these interactions, particularly when negative, can overwhelm a child's rational judgment, imprinting feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt that may persist well into the future.

My narrative and Andrés's serve as poignant reminders of the need for compassionate, understanding, and supportive relationships in education. When educators misuse their authority, the consequences can be devastating and enduring. The role of a teacher should be to nurture and protect, not to belittle and harm. As we move forward, it is imperative to cultivate a culture of positive reinforcement and empathy within our schools to ensure that every child, regardless of background or language proficiency, is given the opportunity to thrive and feel valued.

The dynamics of teacher-student relationships are fundamental to the educational experience and play a critical role in shaping the academic and emotional development of students. A nurturing, positive relationship can inspire confidence, engagement, and a passion

for learning, while a negative one can foster a climate of fear, disengagement, and academic stagnation.

Creating a Supportive Learning Environment

Educators must strive to create a safe, trusting environment in which students are free to express themselves honestly, without fear of retribution. This involves active listening without judgment and refraining from imposing one's agenda on student-teacher interactions. By sharing their own learning curiosities, educators can encourage students to take ownership of their learning process, fostering a partnership that respects the student's voices. Explicitly, this includes such things as:

- **Reciprocity in Learning**

Teaching is not a one-way street; it involves a learning attitude where education flows both ways. Acknowledging that educators do not have all the answers and that learning can occur collaboratively sets the stage for a partnership that thrives on shared objectives, rather than prescriptive methods. Research has shown that when students feel connected to their school and teachers, they achieve better academic results and report higher levels of well-being.

- **The Detrimental Effects of Negative Interactions**

Conversely, negative interactions between teachers and students can lead to a host of detrimental outcomes, including chronic stress and emotional distress. The adverse effects of such relationships are not limited to students alone; they can also take a toll on educators, leading to burnout and a decrease in teaching efficacy.

- **The Broader Impact of Stress in Education**

Beyond individual narratives, the broader implications of stress in education are significant. Chronic stress can lead to long-term changes in the brain, affecting memory, learning, and emotional well-being. Stressful educational environments not only hinder academic achievement but can also contribute to mental health issues among students.

The need for positive teacher-student relationships is clear. They are not just niceties; they are necessities for the well-being and academic success of students. As educators and as a society, we must commit to building supportive, understanding, and empathetic educational environments. Only then can we truly nurture the holistic development of each child, ensuring that they have the foundation to grow into well-rounded, emotionally healthy adults. The village required to raise a child must be one of compassion, respect, and unwavering support, reflecting the principles of Neohumanistic Education and fostering a future where every student can thrive.

Enhancing Teacher-Student / Parent-Teacher Relationships

The interplay of relationships within the educational sphere, especially between teachers and students, is a critical determinant of a student's motivation and engagement. Research spanning several decades highlights the profound impact these relationships have on the teaching and learning process. The consensus across disciplines is clear: the nature and quality of children's interactions with their educators are pivotal for fostering a thriving learning environment.

Paulo Freire, a distinguished Brazilian educator, encapsulates this sentiment by stressing the indispensable nature of a caring and loving attitude towards students for anyone committed to education (Freire, "Pedagogy of Freedom"). Cristina Nehring, a critic-essayist, further emphasizes the significance of the emotional bond between student and teacher, likening it to the color that brings vision to life. It is often the personal connection with the educator that ignites a student's interest in the subject matter (Nehring, 2001).

Echoing these thoughts, Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist renowned for his contributions to psychology, reflects on the enduring gratitude we hold for teachers who have touched our human feelings. He advocates that the warmth of these relationships is as crucial as academic content for the growth of a child's soul.

Eugenio María de Hostos's educational philosophies align closely with the foundational belief that relationships are central to the teaching and learning process. His progressive

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approach to education precedes a century's worth of research on the profound impact of relational dynamics in educational settings.

Hostos championed holistic development, integrating moral and civic instruction into the fabric of education, a concept that resonates with Neohumanist principles. This approach recognizes the value of nurturing the whole student—intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually.

His emphasis on moral education parallels the Neohumanist tenet that ethical behavior and understanding are fundamental to a learner's development. Hostos viewed education not just as a path to individual enlightenment but as a vehicle for societal improvement, advocating for reforms to create a more equitable and enlightened society.

The respect for human dignity and the welfare of all beings are cornerstones of Hostos's work, reflecting the Neohumanist commitment to universal love and respect. Additionally, he understood the importance of cultural education, encouraging an appreciation for heritage and a broad, global perspective.

Hostos's legacy in education is one of nurturing relationships that foster comprehensive growth, social reform, and a respect for all life. His ideas remain pertinent, echoing the continuous research on the essential role of positive relationships in effective education. Through this lens, Hostos's work stands as part of the broader research tradition, underscoring the significant influence relationships hold in shaping educational experiences and outcomes.

The motivation for students to learn is greatly influenced by the support and encouragement they receive from significant adults in their lives. The collaboration between parents and teachers is as vital as the teacher-student rapport. Engaging parents and the community at large is indispensable, as schools alone cannot fulfill all the developmental needs of a child. Constructive parent-teacher-student-community relationships

are the cornerstone of any effort to transform public education.

Such collaborative interactions benefit parents, students, and educators alike. The depth of engagement between teachers and families directly affects the extent of parental involvement in children's education. This involvement can range from understanding and supporting the school's curriculum to contributing ideas and experiences that complement the efforts of school personnel. Active parental participation has been shown to benefit students intellectually and motivationally, fostering optimistic attitudes and behaviors toward school, improving attendance, and enhancing participation.

Shared Accountability and the Relational Model of Education

As we conclude this exploration, we recognize that the journey toward a holistic educational model is ongoing and dynamic. The conversations around nurturing the heart of holistic education, fostering enduring teacher-student relationships, and creating supportive learning environments are not endpoints but gateways to deeper inquiry and action.

We've touched upon the wisdom of Paulo Freire, Carl Jung, and Eugenio María de Hostos, each offering insights that resonate with the principles of holistic relationships in education. Through their perspectives, we gain a richer understanding of the complex interplay between educators, students, and the broader community. Their teachings remind us that the quality of these interactions is crucial in shaping not only academic outcomes but the overall human experience within educational spaces.

The "Relational Model" of education, centered around shared accountability, exemplifies how collaborative efforts can result in transformative experiences because each

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member of the educational community has a distinct role within a collaborative framework. By valuing each individual's role and fostering authentic connections, we pave the way for education that is responsive, empathetic, and deeply rooted in the community's fabric. It is within the nexus of these complex social interactions that schools and districts can function effectively and authentically.

In upcoming discussions, we will delve into initiatives like New Haven's Social Development Program and School Development Program, which stand as pioneering models for integrating social and emotional development into educational frameworks, known currently worldwide as social emotional development. These programs exemplify the transformative potential when a community unites in the educational process, striving to cultivate children who are not just intellectually adept but also emotionally intelligent and socially skilled. They serve as powerful evidence that holistic development is essential for nurturing well-rounded individuals prepared to navigate the complexities of the world.

As this article is just a starting point, future discussions will delve further into the nuances of these relational dynamics. We will explore how the ancient wisdom of hunter-gatherer societies can inform our modern educational practices, offering a lens through which we can reimagine the educational landscape.

In forthcoming articles, I plan to introduce the "science of community" which is not just a concept but a living practice that infuses every aspect of learning with care, empathy, and mutual growth, ... thus, constituting some of the foundational principles that will guide the construction of educational environments where the village does not just support but thrives on the holistic development of its youth.

The science of community is characterized by its use of diverse research methodologies, from quantitative analysis to qualitative ethnographic studies, aiming to foster an integrated understanding of how communities function, develop, and can be sustained optimally. It signifies a holistic and informed approach to community studies, bridging theory and practice for the betterment of society. It encapsulates a multi-disciplinary approach to understanding the complex tapestry of relationships and structures that define community life. It merges fields such as community psychology, which probes the interplay between individuals and their communities; sociology, which dissects social structures and dynamics; community development, which seeks to enhance communal well-being through participatory and sustainable methods; and ecology, which examines the interactions within biological communities. Additionally, it involves the cultural insights provided by anthropology, the health-centric focus of public and community health disciplines, and the practical aspects of urban planning and community design.

We stand on the brink of redefining education, not as a series of transactions, but as a transformational process where every interaction, every moment, is an opportunity to nurture, to grow, and to unite as we continue to weave the rich tapestry of holistic relationships that are the bedrock of education for a compassionate and thriving society.

Ultimately, for educational initiatives that aim to foster relationships between families and schools to be impactful, they must be context-specific, focusing on the unique needs of each school or district. A holistic approach that involves parents, teachers, and school staff in all aspects of school life is essential. Traditional bureaucratic models of School-Home-

Community interactions often fail to create the necessary authentic connections. By promoting respect, recognition, and a sense of belonging, schools can become vibrant communities where each child's holistic development is supported and nurtured.

In future articles, we will explore these concepts in greater depth, offering ideas for constructing educational environments where collaborative relationships are not just encouraged but are integral to the framework of holistic education.

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A Call for Rational Visionary Writing

Neohumanist Review invites submission of articles for publication in its bi-annual (March and September) issues. The journal comprises multiple disciplines to address the most vexing planetary issues, such as social and economic inequality, ecological collapse, war and peace, mass immigration, and technological transformations, from the joint perspective of art, science, philosophy, and spirituality.

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