


# Embodying Deeply Held Values in Education: Seeking a More Equitable World for Both Humans and Non-Humans

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## Highlights

- In this article, we contend that the bedrock of an equitable world lies in the profound recognition of love as the fundamental force permeating the cosmos.
- We believe that love is built into the essence of who we are.
- We posit that genuine progress toward an equitable world is elusive unless we place love, both for one another and for the natural world, at the core of our educational endeavors.

## Keywords

Embodied practices, heart and spirit, love and equity, love as a cosmic force

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The plain fact is that the planet does not need more successful people. But it does desperately need more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers, and lovers of every kind. It needs people who live well in their places. It needs people of moral courage willing to join the fight to make the world habitable and humane. And these qualities have little to do with success as we have defined it. (Orr, 2004, p. 12)

## Introduction

Improving education to create a more equitable world is a lofty vision and a dream shared by many people. However, we—researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in education—seldom discuss the deeply held values that would make such an equitable world possible. In this article, we contend that the bedrock of an equitable world lies in the profound recognition of love as the fundamental force permeating the cosmos. This idea resonates with the philosophical and moral insights of important spiritual teachers, both historical and contemporary, such as Confucius, Mahatma Gandhi, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (King, 1999; Lin, 2006, 2018). They teach us that love is the energy that sustains the universe, making us truly human.

We believe that love is built into the essence of who we are. We are born with the capacity and need for love. During the nascent stages of human life, infants are wholly reliant on the affection and care provided by others for their sustenance and development; humans in their infancy would not survive without the care and love of others. Moreover, extending our gaze beyond humanity, we see that love serves as the vital energy propelling the diverse spectrum of life forms inhabiting our planet (Bekoff, 2007). For example, elephants walk in a group with their young in the center being protected by the adult elephants in the outer ring. This exemplifies the profound sense of care and compassion ingrained in nature's design (Moss, 2000). Likewise, when humans extend their attention and care to the well-being of plants, these organisms respond with heightened growth and vitality, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between love and the flourishing of life (Noddings, 2003).

When we see the world through the lens of love, which manifests as respect, cooperation, reciprocity, humility, and interdependence, we see the intricate threads that weave the fabric of a harmonious universe. Indeed, it is through these virtues that the cosmos maintains equilibrium and unity (Berry, 1990). Planets in the solar system move around the sun smoothly; their orbits do not collapse into each other due to the principles of interdependence, cooperation, and harmony. This demonstrates how love enables the universe to function harmoniously. We are built in the likeness of the universe; plants and humans share the same genes that originated billions of years ago when plants and animals shared a common ancestor (Cassimally, 2011). Furthermore, our cells show the same structure as the solar system and the Milky Way. In this context, it is paramount to acknowledge the fundamental interconnectedness that binds all living beings, encompassing both humans and the natural world.

## **Love and oneness as fundamental values for an equitable world**

In contemporary education, acquiring knowledge and skills is key for learners to be considered successful and useful in the world. Yet, education has been reluctant to focus on love, care, joy, and trust, relegating them to the periphery of the educational discourse (Noddings, 2003; Palmer, 2017). This relegation has significant consequences, as our calling for an equitable world is oftentimes abstract, resting on debates and rhetoric, or focuses on superficial levels such as the equitable distribution of resources, expansion of educational access, and accumulation of knowledge; such a perspective is frequently driven purely by individual and socioeconomic aspirations. We posit that genuine progress towards an equitable world will remain elusive unless we place love, both for one another and for the natural world, at the core of our educational endeavors. Without establishing love for each other and for nature as our fundamental values, no matter how much progress we make in education, we will inadvertently perpetuate a world characterized by systemic oppression and exploitation, rooted in divisive and hierarchical value systems (Hooks, 1994; Noddings, 2005; Nussbaum, 1998). Crucially, more education does not automatically equate to less inequality and destruction of nature; humanity is currently more educated than ever, yet we are facing the existential crises of climate change and species extinction (Komatsu et al., 2020).

Critical scholars have diligently scrutinized systemic oppressions, social injustices, violence, and hatred, advocating for the redistribution and sharing of resources and opportunities as crucial steps toward rectifying these issues (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983). Nevertheless, it has become evident that meaningful change remains elusive without a profound transformation in our hearts—a transformation rooted in love. It is imperative to recognize that these inequitable systems and policies do not exist in isolation; they are products forged, sustained, and reinforced by human agency and belief systems (Bourdieu, 1977; Rabinow & Rose, 2003).

## **Heart and soul matter for an equitable world**

The forces that are capable of establishing and sustaining a truly equitable world come first and foremost from the heart and soul. It is within the sanctum of our spirits that the true forces for equity manifest, ultimately governing our physical bodies, hearts, and minds. At the very core of this spiritual understanding is the belief that we are all equal souls travelling through a journey on earth and that we have a shared humanity which, in the teaching of the African Ubuntu philosophy, means our destiny is interconnected: “I am because we are.” This recognition compels our hearts to resonate with empathy, compassion, and love for one another. Fundamentally, our spiritual essence transcends the boundaries of social hierarchies, affording us equal footing on this profound level of existence. From this perspective, education is not just about reaching outward to acquire knowledge and skills, but primarily about finding our True Self (Lin & Khoo, 2022), which is loving and bound up with the world and the whole universe, as we inter-are.

In light of this, the primary focus of education should be on awakening our hearts and kindling the radiant light of our spirits, thereby nurturing our capacity to embrace love for one another and collectively elevate the human experience (Lin, 2006; Palmer, 2017). It is pivotal that we realize that education serves a far greater purpose than helping learners secure employment, accumulate wealth, or build their reputations. Its essence lies in the pursuit of self-discovery, a journey that invites us to question the reasons for our existence and how we should relate to one another (Noddings, 2003). In this context, an equitable education empowers individuals to flourish holistically, nurturing not only their intellect but also their spiritual well-being (Palmer et al., 2010).

Throughout human history, various spiritual traditions, such as Taoism and Buddhism, have advocated for the cultivation of wisdom and the pursuit of inward journey to connect with the source of energy and light within us (Kapleau, 1989). This journey leads to a state of enlightenment, representing a heightened state of consciousness and a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world around us (Kudesia & Nyima, 2015). Such an enhanced awareness invariably fosters compassion and ignites the aspiration to actively contribute to the creation of an equitable world, a world characterized by peace that embraces the well-being of all living beings (Lin, 2018, 2019).

In sum, the pursuit of equity and an equitable world is not primarily or solely an intellectual or economic endeavor; it is fundamentally a spiritual journey. Education, as a transformative force, should encompass the profound dimensions of the human spirit, enabling individuals to unlock their innate capacity for love, empathy, and compassion. It is in this deep, spiritual understanding that we discover the path to personal enlightenment and the collective endeavor to forge a world that cherishes and nurtures the flourishing of all.

### **Extending our understanding of an equitable world to non-humans**

A more equitable world is directly related to a more sustainable world. However, we often fail to connect these two aspects. An equitable world is one in which we share resources while refusing to exploit nature. In an education aiming for such a world, we inquire, explore, and ponder about our position in the cosmos, recognizing our total dependence on Mother Nature. This practice requires that our awareness encompasses not only human society but also our non-human kin who inhabit the Earth planet. Hence, a more equitable world must include beings other than humans, who also have a claim to this earth as their home. Thus, we need to elevate our awareness to become spiritually connected with all species that exist on earth. Indigenous people have a profound understanding that we are part of a broader ecological community, one that thrives on principles of respect, reciprocity, and ecological harmony (Deloria, 1972; Kimmerer, 2015). For example, they refer to non-human beings as “bearpeople,” “birdpeople,” or our relations or relatives, and believe that the non-human inhabitants of the Earth possess an equal claim to this shared home. By embracing such perspectives and integrating them into our educational frameworks, we can

move closer to the realization of a truly equitable world, where all beings, human and non-human alike, are honored and cherished as vital members of our shared planetary home.

### **Calling for contemplative, holistic education**

In the contemporary educational landscape, metrics of success and utility are disproportionately tied to the acquisition of knowledge and skills, with a notable emphasis on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines. STEM subjects are equated with national competitiveness and human advancement and thus enjoy a much higher funding priority. This prioritization has led to the marginalization of studies in the arts and humanities, thereby diminishing opportunities for dialogue and cultivation related to concepts such as love, friendship, and joy. During the Enlightenment era, employing the rational mind was widely perceived as the cornerstone of human exploration; thus, intellectual advancement was prioritized over other facets of human experience and achievement. This belief, which led to scientific development driven by rational inquiry, has created the ideology whereby cognitive prowess is viewed as a primary driver of societal progress and individual growth. By disproportionately emphasizing the development of the rational mind, and neglecting the exploration and cultivation of love, education has profoundly overlooked our need to foster the heart and spirit.

Accordingly, a radical transformation in education should take place, shifting away from a competitive paradigm to one of inner exploration, fostering an inward journey to tap into the intrinsic source of energy within and nourishing the growth of love as our vital life energy and source of our essence and virtues (Culham & Lin, 2020; Palmer, 2017). This internal development can then be extended outward to forge connections with others, and learning would thus allow students to delve deeply into commonalities shared by individuals, particularly through exploring the source that underpins human existence. This approach emphasizes the embodiment of wisdom arising from the profound depths within each individual (Culham & Lin, 2020; Palmer, 2017). Throughout history, sages have searched for inner wisdom by going within, through meditation and mindfulness, wherein they contemplated and experienced revelations; through such experiences, they felt in their body, heart, and soul that humans are spiritually connected to and identical with all existence. This is a process of coming to know their Higher Self or True Self (Lin & Khoo, 2022). Such experiences denote a level of higher consciousness, through which an individual can realize that we are in this world to love, create, share, and work with one another, to elevate each other through love. As part of the educational transformation that such a worldview presupposes, we contend that the following should be key focus areas.

#### ***Applying embodied learning***

We must embrace a holistic approach to learning, actively involving our body, mind, heart, and spirit in the educational journey. It is imperative to cultivate intellectual understanding, bodily well-being, emotional balance, and a connection with our heart to harmonize with our Higher Self.

Educational pedagogies and curricula should undergo a substantial transformation to seamlessly incorporate contemplative practices within the classroom environment. Learners should be empowered to understand their bodies, listen to their inner voice, and align their life goals with their true callings. Recognizing the profound significance of silence and contemplative practices, including activities like tai chi, yoga, and nature walks, is crucial. These practices are not merely supplementary but integral, allowing students to personally experience knowledge and truth.

### *Cultivating the heart*

To build a more equitable world, education should prioritize cultivating the heart to achieve mutual kindness, compassion, and empathy. Education should transmit energy and love rather than merely imparting factual knowledge. The balance of body, mind, heart, and spirit is crucial in this regard. Incorporating contemplative practices would allow us to build connections, not only to each other but also to nature. When we open our hearts to feel and receive intuition and wisdom, our knowledge becomes both deep and personal. Furthermore, when we open our spirit, we sense the divinity and sacredness of all existence. Direct experience of knowing that we are part of each other and come from the same Source will build compassion and willingness to support each other.

### *Seeking inner tranquility*

Knowing the world and ourselves deeply and holistically is premised on reflective learning and contemplation. Going inward is critical for us to quiet down the noisy mind and start to sense and resonate with each other and the world. Education for an equitable world should seek to observe commonalities among differences, investigate the subtleties of life forms and their sacred purposes, observe how the cosmos and nature work, and how human society depends on virtues to sustain itself in a state of harmony (Culham & Lin, 2020). These practices allow us to be lifelong learners and to go beyond our physical differences and connect with all others in energy, heart, mind, and spirit. In cultivating our inner selves, we go beyond the ego; we transcend ideological and structural barriers toward creative expressions of life and the exploration of our common destiny. Without a sense of interbeing and togetherness, an equitable world is unattainable.

## **The alignment of contemplative education and activism in pursuing an equitable world**

The intersection of contemplative education and activism constitutes a powerful synergy in the pursuit of a more equitable world. While the traditional image of activism often conjures notions of vocal and physical protest, there is immense value in integrating contemplative practices such as self-reflection, inner exploration, and cultivating inner peace into the activist's toolkit

(Wu, 2023). Contrary to misconceptions that may label contemplation as passive or indicative of weakness, we agree with Wu (2023) that these practices offer substantial benefits in our proactive endeavors toward equity, manifesting in three distinct ways:

### *Cultivating awareness*

Contemplative practices foster a heightened state of receptivity, observation, and openness to our immediate environment and inner selves. This heightened awareness extends to the broader societal and ecological context, enabling individuals to forge vital connections between seemingly disparate events and phenomena (Kabat-Zinn, 2006; Zajonc, 2006). Such awareness is foundational for informed and responsible decision-making, both at the individual and collective levels. By fostering a deeper understanding of the complex web of interdependencies, contemplative education equips activists with the knowledge needed to take meaningful and effective actions (Palmer et al., 2010).

### *Facilitating genuine communication*

Contemplative practices are instrumental in establishing open, trusting, and empathetic communities, where individuals feel safe and empowered to express their innermost thoughts, feelings, and vulnerabilities (Palmer, 2004; Zajonc, 2006). Mindful listening, coupled with respect and humility, forms the bedrock of genuine and effective communication (Rosenberg, 2014). In the realm of activism, this translates into the ability to articulate beliefs with clarity, while also creating an environment conducive to dialogue and finding common ground. By harnessing the power of contemplation, activists can transcend the barriers of intense emotions and preconceived notions, fostering connections rooted in authenticity and compassion (Macy & Johnstone, 2022).

### *Nurturing resilience and perseverance*

Activism often entails grappling with moments of frustration and stagnation. In such times, gratitude exercises and the support of a trusted community play a pivotal role in sustaining motivation and reaffirming one's commitment to the cause (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Palmer, 2004). Contemplative practices provide the mental and emotional space necessary for activists to step back, recenter themselves, and engage in critical self-reflection. This inward journey is essential not only for personal well-being but also for ensuring that activism strategies are practical and effective. By embracing contemplation, activists can cultivate resilience, maintain a sense of purpose, and navigate the ebb and flow of their endeavors with grace and fortitude (Macy & Johnstone, 2022; Nhat Hanh, 2014).

In essence, the integration of contemplative education with activism represents a harmonious fusion of inner exploration and outer engagement. These practices are far from passive; they empower activists with a heightened awareness of the world around them, foster authentic

communication, and provide the resilience needed to overcome the challenges inherent in the pursuit of equity. By recognizing the synergy between contemplation and activism, we can enhance our capacity to effect meaningful and lasting change in the world.

## Practicing contemplative teaching and learning pedagogies

With all of the above in mind, we believe that incorporating first-, second-, and third-person learning into education is essential to cultivate holistic educational experiences, strengthen feelings for ourselves and others, and build solidarity to face local and global challenges (Miller, 2014).

First-person learning is experiential and embodied learning. It is powerful not only for us to investigate our inner world and express our daily encounters, but also to step into others' shoes and imagine how someone (or something) might feel. In this way, perspective-taking, empathy, and compassion are developed. In *I Am a Pencil: A Teacher, His Kids, and Their World of Stories*, Swope (2004) shares his experience volunteering for a children's writing workshop in an underprivileged elementary school for three consecutive years. In an exercise where children were asked to write metaphors of themselves, Fatma produced two heartfelt pieces, one of which is presented below:

I'm a book  
 and my cover is ripped  
 and my back is dirty.  
 But the beauty of my pages  
 and the story is still there.  
 No one reads me.  
 even though my story is still there.  
 just because the cover is ripped  
 and my back is dirty.  
 As they all say,  
 "You can't judge a book by its cover."  
 But the problem is,  
 No one follows that moral. (p. 169)

Would it even be possible for us to connect with our loved ones and the world without such expressive, emotional activities?

Questions encouraging us to share and reflect on our perceptions and emotions should be extended to second- and third-person perspectives, that is, attempting to understand others (Project Zero, 2019). For example, we should encourage students to ask: *What makes you/them think so? How do you/they feel? Why do you/they feel this way?* Having reflected on these thoughts and stories, it is essential for us to close the loop, going back to the first-person perspective to achieve



mutual connection: *Have I felt that way before? Why are there differences in opinion and emotional responses and what do those differences mean? Despite these differences, what do WE have in common and what future are WE striving for?* Contemplative, artistic inquiries, sharing, and dialoguing are some pathways for us to genuinely communicate with one another through body, heart, mind, and spirit. Through these practices, we would have more opportunities to engage with ambiguity and differences, thus making us more open-minded, respectful, collaborative, and willing to act in solidarity to make the world a better, more equitable, and sustainable place.

## Conclusion

As we have become more aware of our history, behaviors, and surroundings, many people have stood up against the consequences of inequity—systemic oppression, racism, gun violence, hatred, and more. However, focusing on access, resources, accountability, etc. at the surface level does not truly address inequity. Inequity in education and our world should be tackled at the root level, seeing all of us—all human and non-human beings—as one. From a foundation of oneness and interconnectedness, we would be able to redirect educational resources, reconstruct curricula, and adopt educational pedagogies that embrace a culture of love and care and cultivate healthy and supportive relationships. Accordingly, schools should provide a safe space for holistic inquiry about ourselves and our relationships with other people, society, and the world. By putting ourselves back at the center of education, we would understand our place in this interconnected world and seek to live our lives fully as responsible actors in society and the planetary ecosystem. This is how we can cultivate more committed peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers, lovers of every kind, and responsible, sincere members of the world.

In conclusion, our exploration posits that the foundation for an equitable world lies in the profound recognition and cultivation of love as a unifying force transcending species boundaries; we recognize love's pivotal role in human existence and the broader cosmos. While the pursuit of knowledge and skills is undoubtedly pivotal, the omission of other core values impedes our capacity to address systemic injustices and foster a more harmonious and equitable global society. As critical scholars, it is incumbent upon us to not only critique the prevailing systems but also embark on a profound inner journey toward embracing love as an essential catalyst for transformative change (Zajonc, 2006). As we embark on the path of educational reform, we must embrace and prioritize the values of love, humility, respect, care, empathy, compassion, and solidarity with all living beings. By doing so, we pave the way for a more equitable and interconnected world, where the nurturing embrace of nature itself serves as a profound teacher guiding us toward our shared destiny.

## Contributorship

Jing Lin was responsible for conceptualizing and outlining the article, crafting the main ideas, finalizing the paper, and responding to reviewers' comments. She theorized on love as a cosmic force and connected the concept to

cultivating heart and spirit and pursuing equity. Shue-kei Joanna Mok expanded on the mentioned concepts and elaborated them with contemplative, holistic education and pedagogies. She contributed to literature review and refining the article as well. Virginia Gomes contributed ideas on love and equity in the educational context broadly.

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