

# **What is Integral Education? Mobilizing the Community for Emergence so that Every Child Can Learn**

## **An interview with Dr. Don Beck<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Summary**

In this interview Don Beck answers the question: what is integral education? He starts by first defining what is meant by integral and outlines three essential aspects, systemics (verticality), Meshworks (communities), and emergence (change). All of which imply dynamic movement. From this perspective he then discusses the purpose of education.

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## 1. Verticality, communities and change

**ND:** I'd like to start by asking the question: what is Integral Education?

**DB:** Let's start by defining what is meant by integral, because too much of what is being called integral thinking is only labels and it doesn't have action.

For me integral means the age following postmodern [GREEN]. It means how we deal with entities and fragments. Whether there're academic topics, ethnic entities, or age groupings. It's about how we deal with differences. In the postmodern age all the differences were laid out on a table of equality, but we were so busy celebrating the richness of each, and the rights of each to exist that we had difficulty differentiating and making important distinctions. This table of equality was a necessary step following the premodern and modern ages, or in terms of memetics following the BLUE and ORANGE memes. The BLUE meme tended to focus on nuns with rulers, very strict kinds of right and wrong. The ORANGE meme meant materialistic education and focused only on success, achievement and getting things.

Integral for me means three things. One, it means verticality. That is a legitimate recognition that rather than these entities laid out in the table of equality there are stair-steps, layers, levels, waves of development, of differentiation, and of complexity. So in terms of solving problems – particularly applied universally – they don't have equal rank or equal weight. That's disturbing obviously to some.

A second part of integral is horizontal, in that particular stakeholders are forces that are trying to work in society, i.e. home, church, school, law enforcement, health care sector, business sector, politicians, and sports. All the above are not seen as separate compartments, but rather their efforts are brought together. Not just under a common cause but within what are called systemics, which is the term that reflects verticality. The word I use here would be a Meshwork, so that we can mesh these different things and different disciplines like psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, and neurology and see them as not separate topics but as integrally related. And of course these come together in the quadrants, levels and lines schematic where we see the holons as interconnected so that we don't approach any topic in only one of them. You don't deal with education only by dealing with education, or with race only by dealing with race, or crime only by dealing with crime. Everything is seen from a multiposition or multicausation dynamic as apposed to single events as symptoms that can be addressed in a singular fashion.

So we have systemics – that's the understanding of vertical movements. We have Meshworks which is the understanding of horizontal interrelationships. The third part of that is emergence, the idea of the inevitability of change. We are not steady state systems in harmony. Searches for harmony are only temporary respites or interludes from periods of chaos then back to periods of harmony, then back to periods of chaos. By recognizing emergence we accept the dynamic of the driving pulse, whether it is from the left, from the right, whether it's conservative, liberal, or whether it's in Blooms intergroup tournaments. We recognize the fact that there is both horizontal and vertical movement simultaneously. And so there is action. YELLOW thinking, which is an I:ME:MINE system, has that sense of movement in it. Clare Graves used the term "Never ending quest."

So integral implies systemics (verticality), Meshworks (communities), and emergence (change) all brought together into interesting mixtures and dynamics.

## 2. Teaching children how to think

**ND:** From this integral perspective, what does education mean?

**DB:** I sometimes when working in school districts ask them not to use the word education. Education means to liberate, to free up. Which is to free up for what? Often it's reduced to closing down and stopping dynamic movement. Children are taught what to think, not *how to think*. This is really not education because it has frozen frames in it with flatlander depositories of truths as if they are forever and ever. So if we are going to then look at this thing called education I often use the term intelligences, which include IQ, EQ (emotions quotient), and VQ (values quotient).

## 3. Acquiring layers and levels of complexity – emergence of PURPLE (safety and security) and RED (self esteem)

**DB:** So in addition to reading, writing and arithmetic (the three R's) a sub-theme of every teacher in every contact with a student ought to be emergence, ought to be equipping the child to cope with the world ahead and to use the knowledge that is being obtained so that the individual comes out of the conduit – because I like to think of education as a conduit through which minds pass. So when you first come into kindergarten and first grade or what would be freshmen at high school – they pass through this environment where they acquire the coping skills – the layers and levels of complexity. Some people use Piaget for that, while others use Robert Kegan and all kinds of different models. And because I use Clare Graves work I become interested initially in PURPLE bonding which answers the question: Am I going to be okay here? Because the first issue is safety and security and if that's not established in the children's focus then it's difficult to begin learning. A second concern is what kind of person can I be? How powerful can I be? Do I have a sense of self that is unique from being part of the family or even a class or whatever? That's part of the early development of self-esteem, where the child also has focus on the future. Because the warm I:ME:MINE colors tend to have movement in them. So how can the child develop the RED system, if any expression of the RED system is instantly punished because of the Order or nuns with rulers? If it's contained versus facilitated then it sets up serious problems for emergence later on. If it runs loose, runs amuck, then that's why Ritalin and other drugs are used unfortunately.

<i>Meme</i>	<i>Sense of</i>	<i>Concerned with</i>
8. TURQUOISE	Wholeness	How can I synergize the field?
7. YELLOW	Verticality	How can I mobilize emergence?
6. GREEN	Sensitivity	How can I find peace and harmony now?
5. ORANGE	Self-direction	How can I improve and compete?
4. BLUE	Order and responsibility	What is the truth, and the goal?
3. RED	Self	What kind of person can I be?
2. PURPLE	Safety and security	Am I going to be okay here?
1. BEIGE	Survival	Am I going to survive?

## 4. Biological conditions of individuality

**DB:** Because some children come into the school environment with biological conditions, that's to me what they are. They have difficulty to sit still and focus and are disruptive. I'm not saying that's the RED system, I'm saying that's an expression of individuality that can be disruptive to a learning experience.

In some cases Ritalin is justified. My wife is a classroom teacher for many years and she had many examples of students. She would show me the examples of tests students took they before took Ritalin and it was like a chicken writing with a pen, they just couldn't do it. And then just right after Ritalin the same test was done very clear and demonstrative. These are biological systems that we're looking at here. But there is tendency to over drug and treat any disruptive behavior in this way. That's not good either.

## **5. Emergence of BLUE (order and stability)**

**DB:** Certainly much of education is around the BLUE system; the teaching of truth and knowledge is critical and unless this capacity is awakened in children then the more complex systems are seriously compromised. BLUE can be too heavy handed, and sometimes it is in traditional schools. Certainly in Germany you see a lot of that still. But if the BLUE system is eliminated it will create Calder sacks [dead ends] in learning and seriously impair development. There are all kinds of ways to introduce BLUE, the idea of learning discipline, responsibility and accountability, without being intrusive. The theme of BLUE is sacrifice now to obtain later. Well if one is not willing to delay gratification – the RED system is instant gratification – if you can't sit still, if you can't get you're homework done, if you can't turn off the television, if you can't learn that kind preparation, where in the early years so much learning occurs, then that particular child is at a distinct disadvantage later on. That's why so many parents in the US are sending their children to private schools.

Because of fear of litigation, class action suits filled by parents against teachers, teachers are now very reluctant to impose any kind of discipline and that's why the schools are coming with this horrible zero tolerance, which means they have vacated the idea of discipline by saying any offences will automatically cause this repercussion. So the kid brings cough drops to school and because that's medicine, and medicine is like drugs, then therefore the kid is sent home. Now that's insanity. That's overreach because of a huge vacuum we have allowed to develop where so much of our educational thinking in teacher associations have bought so much into that GREEN system that they have removed a legitimate BLUE corridor or conduit, and to recover it, because of so much violence in the schools, where kids shoot kids, we'll just clamp down on any deviant behavior that we see and will automatically expel the child. Well that doesn't help either, that's still not teaching.

**ND:** What has been the result?

**DB:** Policemen often coming into school to arrest even kids in sixth grade. A fear laced education environment where teachers walk on eggs. And more that anything else it has caused a large number of very effective teachers to leave.

**ND:** So there is no sense of safety and security and higher purpose for the teachers or the students. It's all based on fear?

**DB:** Exactly. Why should a teacher put up with that? And expose himself or herself to a class action lawsuit? You'd have to hire an attorney. So the intrusion of trial attorneys and the quickness for our system to litigate means that we have a very disruptive element in the schools.

## **6. Not seeing vertically – not taking responsibility**

**DB:** It's a stopgap measure. We have too many attorneys and have become a litigant prone society. We have a celebrated case where a woman bought a cup of coffee from McDonalds

because it was hot, and because she was driving and the cup was open she got it spilt on herself and burned her leg. She sued McDonalds and she won the case.

**ND:** So the person responsible for the consequences of the behavior – for having the cup open while driving – abdicates responsibility?

**DB:** That's right and that produces this morass and confusion in the school. We see the larger society's inability to handle the BLUE system conveyed into the school system and thus corrupting the school system.

**ND:** It's actually very serious because no one is taking responsibility for what it is they are doing.

**DB:** Yes it's very serious because our school boards, who are elected from the community, which is good, also become very political. We have textbook banning from the more fundamental extreme right wing involvement in the school board. Strong political forces that don't want certain things taught in school influencing the authorization of textbooks.

## **7. Emergence of ORANGE (responsibility for self improvement)**

**DB:** This takes us into the fifth level system where the RED sense of self together with the BLUE sense of order and responsibility matures into an ORANGE sense of self-direction and an autonomous ability to navigate. From goal setting to sacrificing now so one can express now in a calculated fashion. To take responsibility for self and to improve, because the idea of improvement is characteristic of the ORANGE system.

My thesis has been that rather than simply hold the schools and teachers responsible we have to look at the whole community. It's up to the community to generate the "field." Studies of IQ development documented that increase in IQ levels is not as much a function of the school as the milieu in which a student lives – what's in the newspapers, what's on television, what happens at church – all these things are powerful shaping forces. And of course the old proverb from Africa, that "it takes a whole village to raise a child." There is some truth in that in terms of the levels of caring and support and nurturance of children versus turning little kids off on their own prematurely.

## **8. We need to act as if our children were the only ones left**

**DB:** I often use a reframing activity to change the context like: What would you do if the only children to survive were the children living in your own society? Would you treat them the same way that you are treating them today? Would you throw caution to the wind and let them fend for themselves? Or do you think you would be a bit more particular, a bit more supportive? What is it you spend all your money and time trying to do? What if you spent that on how to raise kids? To those that reply, "Well it doesn't matter today" I reply, "Well it would matter if your children were the only ones left." We need to act as if they were the only ones left. I try to build urgency by changing the context, in terms of what is important.

So this is where the ORANGE system starts. Rather than home, church, school being divisive, they are on the same page. That way the child gets the reinforcement when he goes to the barber shop, when he goes to church, when he goes to youth league, when he has a job the first time in a grocery store, whatever those smaller town more rural kind of conditions. That's where we see a lot of these healthy systems.

**ND:** Everyone is pulling together seeing that they are playing a vital role in the values and norms being conveyed in the community.

**DB:** That's right. In the old days, even in the south in black communities, there were always grandmothers sitting on porches watching, and you didn't get out of line very long before, even though it wasn't your grandmother, she was right in your face. Well we chased grandmothers off porches; it's not safe for them to sit on porches any more. So we have kids just running amuck in gangs, and it's so easy for politicians to blame the oppressors when the problem is at home.

## **9. Natural environments that facilitate emergence**

**DB:** The other thing that we have tried to do in some urban high schools is introduce the culture of the cowboy and horse. Some police officers in Dallas came up with a bunch of old, but nice horses. They found a place to put them in a stable close to the school. A place was created for kids from urban settings to take care of horses. Why? Because horses want to be fed exactly the same time each day. So the culture of the farm, in this case, even the horses, has had a stabilizing effect on these kids that they get no other place. It gives an example of a very innovative way to introduce BLUE and it wasn't expensive. Whenever people donate too much money and make it "dude ranch fancy" they miss the whole point. The point is to smell the hay and the manure and get up early in the morning and do the chores that need to be done each and every day. If I were in charge of education in places like that I'd be sure that we'd have ranches near the school and that we use those, that we don't send kids out to expensive hotels, but that we send them out to work hard.

**ND:** That's a great example.

**DB:** We buy into the cyber world saying that, "My kids can go onto the Internet and learn about..." Well, no they can't smell manure on the Internet. So close to the earth is really what I'm talking about. But it doesn't have to be horses. Centered on the earth and the nature of the earth itself and the tides, and the season changes and all those things are so healthy in centering of the child and without that centering then it's very difficult to get the kind of permanent education system working for them. So if the whole community, the whole milieu is engaged in this thing then that's when we can really begin to see major progress on behalf of the kids.

Obviously I'm not a supporter of age-based promotion. I understand generally speaking that children develop physically around some of the time frames, but that's not always the case for every child. So even we have big issues in our country about maturation promotion. If the kid hasn't learnt anything but because he is getting bigger then he will be automatically promoted to the next grade where he will fail even more.

## **10. Left-brain and right-brain learning styles**

**DB:** I also believe in careful diagnosis of the child's learning style. One of our issues has been why black and Hispanic kids lag behind European white kids. That's why I spent so much time in Africa trying to figure it out. The African culture and African language is heavy right brain. The music is, the rhythm is. It's not just African; there is a tribe in the Amazon that they just found that can only count to three. They had no number sense beyond one, two, three. They didn't need it. So if you try to teach calculus in that language you don't have a chance. So until we defuse the issue about ethnicity and language preferences clearly English, because of its Shakespearian sophistication in global awareness has codes of mathematical

capabilities that seem to go far beyond many other languages, especially tribal languages. So this means mandatory learning of English or Spanish or Dutch or any of the others languages that have the same European language code. I just don't think there's an option.

## **10. Experiences from South Chicago**

**ND:** What would you suggest as being a good approach for teaching in those sorts of contexts?

**DB:** Well I've done this in South Chicago. I looked at why companies like Amaco and Motorola weren't hiring graduates from Robeson high school because of lack of literacy, numeracy and lack of work ethic. We then went to the elementary and middle schools that feed students to Robeson high school and began to put in boot camps of the mind that would automatically boot-up a digital sense. I even had kids marching in platoons with shirts with Vietnam drill sergeants in charge of it, learning how to count while they're marching. Using the kinesthetic sense in trying to input mathematical. Because the digital sense is relatively weak that's why the math's scores are very low in African-American students.

This gets into very sensitive rational issues, but the evidence is just overwhelming to be ignored. Theoretically we want whole brain education. And if there are deficiencies in what is stereotypically called the right-brain (analog) sense, then we want to do some things with kids to free them up in arts and music and other things. And if we have kids with a weakness in the left-brain digitizing sense then we want to do things to do that to. It's taken out of the racial context. It simply says that – this is the whole context of multiple intelligences – children are not born equal and that they don't go through equal maturation experiences. So we want to try and broaden that, so we build in elementary school the basis, the raw material of thinking and certainly learning math's and learning punctuation and leaning language, whatever it happens to be, all those things are providing the essential tools. I'm saying that we need to increase it in larger tools sets at the early grades. And if we just ignore that and assume the child has the same available toolsets regardless of where they are living, their background, and their culture, then the child is going to fail. So we need to build the base for the educational environment.

## **11. Our brains are organized differently**

**DB:** I virtually failed third grade. I just didn't have much of a numerical left-brain sense. I've always been heavy right-brain and so my father had to drill me on math's and spelling because I was just flunking school. It wasn't that I was a dumb kid; I was just a dreamy kid – I still am, as you know, a very dreamy guy, I'm not very digital. I have an internal time sense; I'm never late for anything, so I do have that. But I don't keep a lot of careful records and just don't do digital stuff well. Well that got me into a lot of trouble in third grade so I had to suffer the consequences. My parents had to virtually force me into learning and thank goodness that they did. I think every child has strengths and deficiencies for sure. And then to the best of our ability, if education means to liberate, not to produce carbon copy kids, but enlarge the capacity of each of the children based on what is available to them. And to me that is the beginning of the integral approach.

**ND:** Is it a deficiency or is it the teacher not being able to sense the appropriate learning environment?

**DB:** It's both of those. But it starts by being a brain organization issue. Our brains are organized differently. I come from a heavy stuttering background. My grandmother, a lot of

my cousins and even me; I had a lot of serious difficulty. I used to engineer my way to be out of a classroom. When the teacher called the roll I couldn't even answer her. I'd have to go out to the bathroom just then. I look back now and I think: Gosh how did I survive? How in the world did I survive though all that? But you know we've all had something like that in our background where we can look back now and laugh about it. But we sure couldn't then. That "every child can learn" is the theme I learned from it. It's not a matter of using discipline or not using discipline. It's a matter of doing both. We rule out all the "either or's" and use "both and's". I'm inclined to use natural kinds of things to create these learning experiences versus using artificial didactic teaching. So having kids with horses seems to me a natural thing as apposed to sitting in a room talking to them about the earth and about their responsibility. I used to talk about a quantum school, which means mobilizing everything the kid ever got and I see this as a community. Mobilizing the community for vertical emergence.

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