



# Holistic education: An interpretation for teachers in the IB programmes

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## Introduction to IB position papers

This paper is part of a series of papers commissioned by the IB and written by IB practitioners. Each paper addresses a topic or issue related to the IB's philosophy or its educational practices.

### **Other papers in the series**

Marshman, R. July 2010. *Concurrency of learning in the IB Diploma Programme and Middle Years Programme.*

# Introduction

Holistic education has become a familiar topic within current education literature but there are conflicting opinions about what holistic education represents and a single definition remains elusive. There have been claims that holistic education reflects the education of the whole child but little clarity is offered to explain what this means, and in a field of education that is somewhat diverse, it is not surprising that there is confusion over what holistic education represents.

The purpose of this paper is to bring some clarity to what is meant by holistic education and to outline the characteristics and outcomes associated with it. This lack of clarity is an obstacle for teachers, parents and students alike and has the potential to obscure the advantages that this educational approach offers. Furthermore, such clarity would facilitate a comparison with other educational initiatives and allow curriculum designers to test their claims about whether they are delivering a programme of holistic education.

## What is holistic education?

Holistic education does not exist in a single, consistent form. It is best described as a group of beliefs, feelings, principles and general ideas that share a family resemblance (Forbes 2003: 2). It is more than the education of the whole student and addresses the very broadest development of the whole person at the cognitive and affective levels. It emphasizes the education of the student beyond the confines of the classroom and moves the concept of a child-centred educational approach to a much more radical programme of education.

Holistic education focuses on the fullest possible development of the person, encouraging individuals to become the very best or finest that they can be and enabling them to experience all they can from life and reach their goals (Forbes 2003: 17). These experiences or achievements can be rare, special and deeply meaningful experiences for the individual or could represent a position, role or vocation that they perceive as unique or special and is an important goal in their life.

This could be described as the “vision” of holistic education. The aim of holistic education must be to prepare students for a fulfilling and productive life in which their skills and attributes are constantly challenged, developed and applied as part of their lifelong learning. It is an educational journey of personal discovery starting within formal education and then continuing throughout life. The learning and life experiences are continuous with individuals gaining in different ways from the various situations and demands that they are presented with. It could be argued that this is the aim of any good educational system. This is not disputed but while there remains a predominant focus on the value of a knowledge-based educational system the advantages of holistic education will not be realized.

## What are the features of holistic education?

A programme of holistic education aims to encompass all aspects of personal learning and growth and emphasizes the development of active relationships at all levels, whether these are between the subject domains, between individuals and their peer groups and communities or between the individual and the world around them. Miller (1991: 3) has proposed that education may be described as holistic when it exemplifies the following characteristics.

- Holistic education nurtures the broad development of the students and focuses on their intellectual, emotional, social, physical, creative or intuitive, aesthetic and spiritual potentials.
- It promotes the importance of relationships at all levels within a learning community in which the educator and student work together in an open and collaborative relationship.
- There is an emphasis on life experience and learning beyond the confines of the classroom and the formal educational environment towards education as growth, discovery and a broadening of horizons. It encourages a desire to elicit meaning and understanding and to engage with the world.

- The approach empowers learners to examine critically the cultural, moral and political contexts of their lives. It leads learners towards actively challenging and changing cultural values to meet human needs.

Even a brief comparison of these characteristics with the aims and objectives of the IB programmes will reveal common features. These characteristics can be applied within any of the IB programmes and complement the continuum of IB programmes.

Holistic education has the capacity to lead the students into new areas of thinking, to broaden their personal and critical thinking and develop an appreciation of the world around them, and to realize the importance that relationships have within all these considerations. Importantly, holistic education has the capacity to empower students to think differently, to think creatively and reflect on their own values.

Undoubtedly, teachers would encourage their students to develop into well-educated, informed and participating members of society. This aim is accommodated within holistic education and offers teachers a framework within which to work. It also seeks to develop students actively beyond academic excellence alone.

## Towards a profile of a holistically educated student – the student profile

Since a single definition of holistic education is elusive, the challenge is to identify what the outcomes of a holistic approach to education represent. In this way, teachers, parents and students can identify what is being aimed for and recognize the benefits that this approach can bring.

Holistic education can be associated with a number of recurring themes and values: the family resemblances that were referred to earlier (Forbes 2003: 2). These values are “guidelines for personal behaviour” (Thompson 1993) and it is these personal behaviours that characterize the outcomes of the holistic approach. The behaviours reflect a range of capabilities, skills and competencies that the students will begin to develop as they emerge from a formal programme of holistic education (Hare 2006). The behaviours and attributes associated with holistic education have been drawn together as outcomes within a **student profile**, the significant features of which are shown below.

- **Acts with social and academic maturity and integrity.**

They are confident and at ease with individuals and groups with which they may be unfamiliar and show respect for the culture, opinions and values of others. They challenge accepted wisdom maturely and develop their own understanding from this experience. They learn from their errors, take responsibility for their actions and acknowledge the input and contributions of others.

- **Takes ownership of their own development and learning through planning and prioritization, and they ensure that through their own determination tasks are completed on time.**

They take responsibility for their own personal and academic growth and the outcomes of this. They can set clear and realistic targets, prioritize conflicting demands and plan for success. They persist in their tasks and maintain high standards in their outcomes.

- **Demonstrates flexibility and a creative approach to problem solving.**

Consistently, they can think creatively and laterally using approaches from a number of disciplines and experiences. They feel empowered and confident to find solutions and will take risks in new and unfamiliar areas of thinking and action.

- **Develops and maintains relationships through their interpersonal skills.**

They act with care, consideration, compassion and empathy in their interactions with others from a variety of backgrounds. They learn from their interactions with others. Through active listening and open-mindedness they are ready to consider and accommodate views and opinions that challenge their own thinking.

- **Demonstrates a reflective approach and an attitude of continuous improvement.**

They consider and review their work objectively and reflect on better ways of performing the task. They raise standards when the task is repeated so that improvements are made in the future.

- **Demonstrates effective written and oral communication skills.**

They use the most appropriate way of delivering information in a variety of contexts and situations and appreciate the expectations and needs of the audience. They have sufficient confidence to change and adapt their style of communications should the situation or circumstances change.

- **Demonstrates good meeting management and involvement behaviours.**

They contribute actively and collaboratively to support group discussions and meetings. They challenge others with respect and support and develop the ideas of others to encourage the decision-making process.

- **Seeks to bring clarity to decision-making.**

They bring clarity to the plans and activities that are needed to complete any tasks. They consistently look for ways to exceed standards and expectations and learn from their actions for the future.

- **Through an understanding of their subject areas, their interdependencies and interrelationships, they can appreciate the interconnections in human knowledge; they can appreciate and debate global issues and the impact of human activity on the environment.**

They develop a sound knowledge and understanding of the subjects that they study and can identify the features that draw the subjects and information together as a coherent whole. They are able to transfer skills between disciplines.

From their interaction with others, their experiences and learning, they take a considered global perspective on international concerns and bring an informed appreciation of the issues relevant to these concerns.

- **Effectively uses the information resources that are made available to them to assist in the acquisition of further knowledge and its relevant application.**

They can use data and information management methods effectively, including electronic data and library resources. They can evaluate effectively the value and content of data that they collect and use it appropriately.

None of the skills and attributes that are associated with any one output exists in isolation. A brief inspection of the outcomes indicates that there are skills and competencies that are common within several of the outcomes. Furthermore, all of these outcomes can be regarded as interdependent and consequently, a focus on any single output will similarly address the development of others.

These outcomes should not be interpreted as representing definitive goals that must be achieved within the years of formal education. The skills and attributes supporting a holistic approach to education will develop at different rates and reflect the maturity of the individuals, their personal experiences and the relationships that they develop and from which they benefit. As the student matures, these skills and abilities will serve them well in understanding their role in society, the contribution that they can make and lead them to appreciate the potential that they have to offer.

Learning is envisaged as a lifelong experience. A major difference between the holistic approach and the familiar knowledge-based approach is that the former adopts a planned and considered approach to development beyond academic considerations and at the very broadest level. An emphasis is placed on relationships and the learning emerging from them and takes the student beyond the confines of a knowledge-based education. This delivers personal and interpersonal skills that will bring considerable advantages to the students' progress beyond their formal education.

## The IB learner profile and the student profile

The IB learner profile outlines the attributes and aspirations of internationally minded students engaged in the IB programmes. In common with the student profile, the learner profile identifies educational outcomes at the academic, personal and interpersonal levels. A comparison of both profiles reveals striking similarities, for example, “communicators” within the learner profile has features in common with “acts with social and academic maturity” and “demonstrates good meeting management and involvement behaviours” within the student profile.

The comparison offers evidence that the outcomes of holistic education complement the educational aims within the continuum of the IB programmes and consequently all the IB programmes. Furthermore, since the student profile reflects the outcomes of a holistic approach to education, this comparison suggests that the IB programmes also support that holistic approach.

## The implications of holistic education

Holistic education is a clear departure from the knowledge transmission approach to education that has been familiar in the past. Holistic education prepares a student for lifelong learning in which the educational focus moves towards the life skills, attitudes and personal awareness that the student will need in an increasingly complex world. The commitment to the subject knowledge of the student is maintained but is complemented by learning how to learn, the critical evaluation of knowledge gained and the use of this knowledge in a broad range of contexts; it is these that represent the education currency of the future.

Consequently there is an emphasis on a broad educational approach that addresses the intellectual, personal and interpersonal development of the student and puts in place many of the values, attitudes and skills that will serve the student well throughout life. Such a broad development cannot be claimed by the knowledge-laden education systems that have dominated for so many years. It brings closer the realization of “learning to be” and “learning to live together” that have been identified in the Delors report (UNESCO 1996: 14).

This broad development of the student must be carefully planned at the individual level and has obvious repercussions on teaching strategy, curriculum design and the assessment of progress. The evaluation of the “soft” personal skills such as integrity, care, consideration, negotiation and active listening has never been easy, but these are new challenges in educational assessment. The skills and attributes will constantly be in dynamic development as various situations and scenarios present themselves in which these skills are necessary and appropriate. Evaluative information must be sought on behaviours and actions from a number of sources and in a range of situations and these fed back to the student in a constructive and supportive manner. These behaviours lend themselves to peer review and informal assessment. This could be problematical and brings into focus the importance of the relationship of the teacher and student and between groups of students. Simply offering an assessment in terms of effort and a grade will no longer suffice; such “soft” skills cannot be graded on any scale.

Holistic education calls for students to take ownership of their own development. This ownership will take different forms at different ages and levels of student maturity. Nevertheless, it is a key element within holistic education and teachers will need to be at the forefront of driving this issue and encouraging this ownership.

The supportive role of the parent within holistic education is essential. The behaviours identified in the student profile will also manifest themselves outside the classroom and parents should recognize, encourage and praise such positive behavioural changes.

Holistic education is a radical endeavour. The educational journey starts the process of self-actualization and self-realization through relationships, and interconnectedness with other individuals, groups and the world around them is an integral part. Formal education is merely the starting point of this lifelong process.

## Holistic education: Implications for the teacher

Holistic education represents a new journey for both student and teacher and one in which both parties will grow and critically examine perhaps strongly held values and beliefs. For the educator this could be an unsettling experience; the teacher is moving out of the comfort zone of subject specialization into areas of personal uncertainty. No longer is the teacher depending on subject expertise but is guiding students in developing and examining their own values and prejudices, their critical thinking and behaviours and confronting opinions that are new to them without clear demarcation of right or wrong. This is uncertain territory. Frequently this may be a joint journey of discovery for both student and teacher, with the teacher bringing their greater life experience to the learning process.

Holistic education challenges teachers to think differently about student cognitive and affective development and to examine critically how they practise their craft. The working relationship between the student and the teacher changes; it becomes more inclusive, dynamic and egalitarian. The appropriate pedagogical approach will become one of active, planned interventions that are developed for students to meet their development needs. The teacher's skills of facilitation, guidance and mentoring will feature strongly in promoting learning and understanding at both the academic and social levels. The aim is for students to understand, for example, the importance of relationships, the different ways of regarding knowledge and its evaluation, the importance of life skills and the impact that the students have on others around them.

Teachers must also examine the learning culture within their school so that it is conducive to creating an inclusive learning community that stimulates the growth of a person's creative and inquisitive engagement with the world. The aim becomes the development of healthy, curious individuals who can learn what they need to know and apply it in any new context in which they find themselves and who are self-motivated and confident learners.

## Why is holistic education important and what advantages are there in understanding what it represents?

Holistic education broadens and deepens the educational process. It represents a planned approach that encourages personal responsibility, promotes a positive attitude to learning and develops social skills. These are essentials in the modern world in which we live.

The identification of the outcomes of holistic education has advantages. These outcomes clarify the purpose of this educational approach for students, teachers and parents. Furthermore, it allows parents and students to make an informed choice when they are confronted with different educational systems. The educational characteristics of the IB programmes have much in common

with the outcomes associated with a holistic approach to education. If parents favour a holistic approach to the education of their children then the IB programmes offer such an approach.

## References

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