

## Holistic Education: A Brief Introduction

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Throughout the 200-year history of public schooling, a widely scattered group of critics have pointed out that the education of young human beings should involve much more than simply molding them into future workers or citizens. The Swiss humanitarian Johann Pestalozzi, the American Transcendentalists Thoreau, Emerson and Alcott, the founders of "progressive" education--Francis Parker and John Dewey--and pioneers such as Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner, among others, all insisted that education should be understood as the art of cultivating the moral, emotional, physical, psychological and spiritual dimensions of the developing child. During the 1970s, an emerging body of literature in science, philosophy and cultural history provided an overarching concept to describe this way of understanding education--a perspective known as *holism*. A holistic way of thinking seeks to encompass and integrate multiple layers of meaning and experience rather than defining human possibilities narrowly. Every child is more than a future employee; every person's intelligence and abilities are far more complex than his or her scores on standardized tests.

Holistic education is based on the premise that each person finds identity, meaning, and purpose in life through connections to the community, to the natural world, and to spiritual values such as compassion and peace. Holistic education aims to call forth from young people an intrinsic reverence for life and a passionate love of learning. This is done, not through an academic "curriculum" that condenses the world into instructional packages, but through direct engagement with the environment. Holistic education nurtures a sense of wonder. Montessori, for example, spoke of "cosmic" education: Help the young person feel part of the wholeness of the universe, and learning will naturally be enchanted and inviting. There is no one best way to accomplish this goal, there are many *paths of learning* and the holistic educator values them all; what is appropriate for some children, in some situations, in some historical and social contexts, may not be best for others. The art of holistic education lies in its responsiveness to the diverse learning styles and needs of evolving human beings.

This attitude toward teaching and learning inspires many homeschooling families as well as educators in public and alternative schools. While few public schools are entirely committed to holistic principles, many teachers try hard to put many of these ideas into practice. By fostering collaboration rather than competition in classrooms, teachers help young people feel connected. By using real-life experiences, current events, the dramatic arts and other lively sources of knowledge in place of textbook information, teachers can kindle the love of learning. By encouraging reflection and questioning rather than passive memorization of "facts," teachers keep alive the "flame of intelligence" that is so much more than abstract problem-solving skill. By accommodating differences and refusing to label children as "learning disabled" or "hyperactive," teachers bring out the unique gifts contained within each child's spirit.