Holistic Learning

What does ‘holistic learning’ mean?
Holistic learning is based on child development and early years’ pedagogy. In providing holistic learning educators recognise that children are learning from conception and develop in their own time and at their own pace. They understand that all children are strong, competent and unique. They know that children are creative and independent thinkers, great problem solvers and communicators who learn and grow through play.

Why is holistic learning important?
Children are not divided up into separate domains, learning areas, learning styles, intelligences, creativities, attitudes or dispositions! They are all of these things, all of the time. Educators are responsible for ensuring that theoretical or administratively useful categories are not used to divide children into neat little bundles that actually militate against their learning.

What does holistic learning look like in practice?
Programs in the early years must be integrated, whether they be in care settings or schools. They need to be focussed on helping children to make meaning across whatever categories we use to devise learning programs – domains, learning areas, etc. This is one of the main responsibilities of the educator – and is not something which should be left to the children to do ‘in their heads’ or for families to make sense of at home.

Literacy and numeracy are embedded in meaningful (to the child) learning provided through play based experiences, investigations, inquiries and experiments. This does not preclude intentional teaching (see Stimulus Paper on Intentional Teaching).

As the Early Years Learning Framework says ‘Holistic approaches to teaching and learning recognise the connectedness of mind, body and spirit. When early childhood educators take a holistic approach they pay attention to children’s physical, personal, social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing as well as cognitive aspects of learning.’

What you will not see
• A curriculum divided up into discrete learning areas
• A concentration on literacy and numeracy to the exclusion or minimisation of other domains
• Set, predetermined times for children’s participation in learning experiences

Some questions to think about
• How do you describe and document the strengths of each of the children in your care centre or classroom – including domains, learning areas, learning styles, intelligences, creativities, attitudes and dispositions?
• What else do you need to know about these children and their learning? How can you find out?
• How do you make the learning experiences you provide meet the holistic learning needs of each child?

Some things to do
• Find out what other educators (in your school or care centre, in some others
schools or care centres) do to build holistic profiles of the children with whom
they work.
• With the children with whom you work try experimenting with different grouping
structures e.g. similar of different learning styles, dispositions etc in order to
support their learning.

Some more to read
McGrath H. and Noble T. (1995) Seven Ways at Once: Classroom Strategies Based
on the Seven Intelligences Book 1 Longman
Peter Honey
Kolb D. (1984) Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and
Journal of European Training, Vol 17, No. 10