Director’s Corner: Curriculum

NAEYC’s standard for Curriculum provides a broad overview listing the essential components of a quality early childhood program. The standard does NOT require centers to adopt a packaged curriculum or prescribe one particular educational approach, so centers are free to design their programs based on diverse philosophies, as long as their purposeful design fits the NAEYC criteria. This balance of a structured curriculum framework with the flexibility for intellectual freedom fits well with Carnegie Mellon’s unifying motto of “My heart is in the work” and sets the stage for a laboratory school community in which all learners can engage in and contribute to meaningful learning.

• Our curriculum framework is based on six sets of learning objectives that cover the full range of development and are based on early childhood development theories. You can download these objectives for Self-Esteem & Independence, Interaction & Cooperation, Communication, Discovery & Exploration, Physical Capabilities, Health & Safety, and Artistic Expression & Appreciation from our web site in the “Program” section under “Six Basic Learning Goals”.

• Every aspect of our program is intentionally designed to foster children’s development relative to our specified objectives, including our classroom arrangement, choice of materials, schedules and routines, teaching strategies, etc. In addition, our choice of interdisciplinary thematic curriculum allows us to facilitate broad skill building across all domains while also promoting deep exploration of relevant, real-world topics, such as our upcoming whole school study of Water or other recent whole school units on Healthy Mind & Body, Building, or Theatre Arts. We choose topics to both deepen conceptual development (e.g., studying Desert Habitats after the Water Unit in the Preschool) and to broaden children’s exposure (e.g., exploring Russian Culture in the Kindergarten where several children have Russian heritage but all can benefit from comparing and contrasting cultures).

• Using the framework of developmental objectives in the context of thematic studies makes our curriculum adaptable to a range of children’s ability levels and responsive to diverse child and family experiences, interests and values. Choosing the themes for the year in advance allows educators to locate quality resources and proactively plan to incorporate the wealth of campus and community assets into the unit, while leaving significant openness in the unit design to integrate children’s ideas and emerging interests as the unit progresses. When planning the specific activities within a unit, we balance both the grouping of children – including individual, small group and large group activities – and the style of guidance – including child-guided play, inquiry, and creative expression, as well as teacher-guided lessons and activities.

• In all of these ways, we are laying essential cognitive foundations for the literacy, math, science, social studies, and arts that will be more formally taught in elementary school and beyond. We directly teach and then repeatedly practice the use of essential tools for learning, beginning with basic gross and fine motor skills and cognitive methods for problem solving and inquiry and then gradually introducing physical tools and technologies (e.g., simple machines, cooking utensils, woodworking tools, computers, and other digital media), all with proactive attention to appropriate health and safety issues. Being affiliated with Carnegie Mellon and active in the Pittsburgh early education community provides our educators with a rich network of experts willing to support our children’s learning by contributing their time and resources to our thematic studies, all with the goal of designing the most authentic experiences possible for young children in innovative ways that we can share with other educators as part of our laboratory school outreach.