

## **Curriculum Organization**

by Katherine Lindaman

A learner-centered curriculum best reflects my values and beliefs for the preschool child since I am a firm believer in the Montessori Method of education. Additionally, an integrated curriculum works best for children during the elementary years. In a learner-centered curriculum design, teachers provide few preplanned activities and instead ensure that children have large blocks of time to play and explore in a planned environment (Feeney, et al., 2010, p. 356). Contrastingly, an integrated curriculum organization is based on a particular topic of study that provides curriculum focus. However, a combination of both of these styles of curriculum is most ideal. At the school I founded, we have implemented both curriculum types and have found them to be beneficial to the child and the families we serve. My reason for combining these two types of curriculum, learner-centered for primary and integrated for elementary children, is due to my belief in following the child. The Montessori Method believes the two stages are completely different and, hence, structures curriculum according to the developmental needs of the child.

First, toddler (18 months-3 years of age) and primary (ages 3-6) children are spontaneous in their learning and are naturally curious about the world in which they live, so a curriculum employing a learner-centered organization is appropriate. According to Feeney et al. (2010, p. 356), a learner-centered organization is appropriate in early childhood classrooms and is the best way to plan for infants, toddlers, and young preschoolers. In our Montessori setting we expect the children to explore the environment, and as teachers, we expose them to as many concepts as they are able to grasp for their particular stage of development. Utilizing guidelines as set forth from training, Montessorians sequentially demonstrate materials and observe the children during their practice sessions to see if they have mastered the concept. Once they have mastered a skill, we move on to the next lesson. During the entire process we concentrate on following the child by allowing the child freedom of movement and choice throughout all areas of the class. Many times children will use the apparatus in a creative and exploratory way and we watch to observe their relationship with the material to see if we need to make adjustments to our environment or if we must re-teach; we never correct. We are taught to control our environment, not the child. The teacher works as a guide capitalizing on teachable moments. At this point in a child's development, it is not about memorization of facts but about exposure to their natural world. This is especially true since we understand Piaget and his belief that logic and reasoning does not typically develop until around the age of seven. It is at that time in a child's life that our approach begins to take a more integrative approach.

In an integrative curriculum the topic serves as an umbrella under which different developmental and subject areas are integrated. Montessori believed that the teacher should be a generalist, rather than an expert in a single area of the curriculum (Lillard, 2005, p. 146). Lillard goes on to state that a generalist provides interconnections that might inspire fuller learning than having each area taught as a discrete topic would, and another consideration is that children might become more resourceful and independent with a single, generalist teacher because they go outside for expertise (Lillard, 2005, p. 147). An integrated approach reflects that children learn holistically. In the Montessori lower elementary class (ages 6 to 9), children continue to explore their environment but now their exploration leads to more investigative and integrative type work since their logic and reasoning is beginning to take shape and they are able to research topics. Montessori involves children in actively manipulating concrete materials across the curriculum: writing, reading,

science, math, geography, and the arts. According to Feeney, et al. (2010, p. 357), an integrated study of a topic contributes simultaneously to children's growing awareness, skill, and understanding in many areas. Hence, we expose the children to an array of topics that are more abstract in concept and place expectations of higher level thinking. Typically, we introduce paperwork to reinforce the concepts arrived from the didactic materials. It should be noted that we are aware that development rate varies, so we have an overlap of materials across the levels and we vary our lessons accordingly.

In sum, both the learner-centered and integrated curriculum models work well in combination. Feeney et al. (2010, p. 357), supports a combination of the two types of organization of curriculum based upon the age of the child. Feeney states (2010, p. 357), since the learner-centered curriculum is limited by what children bring to the educational experience, it may not be sufficient to provide intellectual challenge and stimulation as children get older. As a child matures, it is wise to continue with integrated organization since young children learn best and understand when information is presented in more holistic ways, involving the senses, mind and body together. A combination of the two styles, depending upon level of development, defines my values and beliefs on the way curriculum should be organized.

#### Resources

- Feeney, S., Moravcik, E. Nolte, S. Christensen, D. (2010). *Who am I in the lives of children?* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.
- Lillard, A. (2005) *Montessori the science behind the genius*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Morrison, G. (2009). *Early childhood education today*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

#### **Further Note:**

*Curriculum can be organized in different ways. The organizational approaches most often used are learner-centered, subject-centered, and integrated. The above paper summarizes our approach at the Montessori Academy. Our school does not support subject area organization. Although organization by subjects assures that all the areas of content that are valued are given attention, it does not help children understand relationships that exist between subjects. It also fails to take into account children's different interests and different strengths (Feeney et al. 2010, p. 356). Furthermore, subject-centered (text book format) does not focus on each child's individual rate of learning. The Montessori curriculum follows the needs of each individual and fosters a true love of learning through experiential learning with hands on materials and concepts.*

