

Montessori Academy at Sharon Springs **Position Paper: How do we meet current research data?**

A statement by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) urged early childhood educators to “implement curriculum that is thoughtfully planned, challenging, engaging, developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive, comprehensive, and likely to promote positive outcomes for all young children” (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 2003a, p. 1).

To create a meaningful curriculum with respect to how children learn and what children know, VanScoy (1995) has suggested that we trade the three Rs (reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmetic) for the four Es: experience, extension, expression, and evaluation. The current trend is to emphasize the need for flexibility. Curriculum planning should focus on promoting learning and development in the areas of social, emotional, physical, language, and cognitive growth (NAEYC Program Standards). Units should be based on themes that are interesting and developmentally beneficial for all children. Projects are should be based on the interests or passions of the children in the classroom being responsive to student inquiries (Ferguson, 2001; Mindes, 2005) (Eliason and Jenkins, 2008, p. 66).

Facts may eventually become outdated, but the skills of thinking, making meaning, developing understanding, and problem solving never will. Simply, learning how to solve a problem is more important than the solution. As stated in the Eliason and Jenkins text (2008, p. 219), “Many workbook tasks are not interesting, do not provide rich instructional possibilities, lack clear objectives, allow false-positive feedback, consume teachers’ time in scoring them, and most importantly, occupy time that can be otherwise spent teaching students what they do not already know” (Pincus, 2005, p. 79). Furthermore, worksheets make reading a task and create a feeling of drudgery and boredom for many children. Howard Gardner advocates: “The brain learns best and retains most when the organism is actively involved in exploring physical sites and materials and asking questions to which it actually craves answers. Passive experiences tend to attenuate and have little lasting impact” (Gardner, 1999, p. 82). Therefore, learning should be a process of active involvement with rich, meaningful content, using developmentally appropriate practices and approaches, not just focusing on an end result. Learning should include many hands-on experiences (Eliason & Jenkins, 2008, p. 66).

The more input we have from the children in curriculum planning, the closer we come to achieving deeper meaning for children since it connects them to real-world experiences. According to Eliason and Jenkins (2008, p. 67), when children are allowed the luxury of defining curriculum content, when they are able to move in academic directions that interest them, and when they actually do something, they become engaged in their learning (Perrone, 1994). The elementary model of Montessori curriculum clearly allows for the child to make decisions on their own learning by making content choices. When a child is interested in a specific topic they are free to research the topic. Through their research they are acquiring language skills such as reading, writing, and composing. In addition, children use technology to make their content more meaningful. As reported by Eliason & Jenkins, 2008, p. 104), computers become valuable as they enhance, not substitute for discovery and exploration through sensory experiences. They offer unlimited opportunities for learning through manipulation, creative problem solving, and self-directed exploration (Clements & Swaminathan, 1995). As teachers, it is important to educate parents on the importance of allowing children the freedom to explore their own interests.

According to Elaison and Jenkins (2008, p. 67), what is usually best for the child is to allow the child agency and responsibility for his or her own learning. While a student is performing a specific task the teacher focuses on the individual’s process not the product. Teachers take observational notes on each individual so they may address the individual needs through re-teaching areas of weakness. Montessori lessons are conducted sequentially. Once a child masters a specific skill the teacher will guide the child towards the next objective. Specific daily objectives add up to the long-term goals that the teacher is trying to reach (Eliason & Jenkins, 2008, p. 68). According to Eliason and Jenkins (2008, p. 69), a more child-centered approach seeks to learn what experiences the child brings to class and using these experiences along with a child’s questions and interests to guide the lessons of the child. Children in a Montessori environment know how and where to find information. Students in Montessori are actively engaged in their own learning process and have a genuine love of learning since they are able to make choices. Great Montessori teachers are taught how to use the materials, understand why the method is successful, and know what lesson the child needs to master specific concepts. The reason why our program is a success is due to our teachers determining the needs of each individual child and then implementing the necessary lessons to reach goals.

We know from research that all children pass through stages of growth in the various developmental areas; however, children do not pass through these stages at the same rate (Elkind, 1996; NAEYC & NAECS/SDE,

2003). In a classroom of children within a 1-year age range, there may actually be a developmental range of several years in cognitive, social, emotional, and physical areas. Teachers must expect a wide range of individual differences (Elkind, 1996; NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 2003)(Eliason and Jenkins, 2008, p.67) In a traditional model children are asked to do the same things, in the same way, and all at the same time, this model does not honor their distinct individual learning styles, abilities, and interests. In addition, the traditional model too often focuses and considers only the scope and sequence guides and standards established by national, state, and local organizations and pay little attention to the developmental needs of individual children in the classroom. In contrast, the Montessori setting is multi-aged. Multi-age settings provide a child the ability to move at their own pace and provide exposure to older children. Furthermore, the older child has leadership needs met by teaching the younger child. The benefit to the older child is that they are reinforcing the learning they have acquired and have opportunities to develop a higher self-esteem.

An effective approach to understanding the children is to assess them individually in order to determine their strengths, developmental levels, and needs; this also identifies the best place to begin and the competencies that should be stressed. The majority of our documentation centers on sequential lessons. Teachers have documentation that identifies lessons introduced and practiced signifying knowledge gained. At our primary level we evaluate basic concepts through verbal assessments with each individual child. Assessments are another way to evaluate the needs of a child. This fundamental information allows us to structure our lessons in order to accommodate the needs of the individual. However, we do not view testing as a clear indicator of intelligence, nor do we view testing as the only means to understand the child. Our interpretations of the child are derived from observation notes, portfolios, input from the child, and concepts/skills mastered. According to Eliason and Jenkins (2008, p. 70), portfolios, projects, or self-evaluations are used as alternatives to tests and are considered to be more authentic and appropriate. However, due to our requirements from SACS we have implemented ITBS testing for our third year students at each level in the upper school. Eliason and Jenkins report (2008, p.71) that we must make it very clear that group-administered standardized achievement tests are not recommended before the third grade (Kamii, 1990). "Individually constructed meanings cannot be measured within the constraints of standardized tests" (Heuwinkel, 1996, p. 30) such alternative assessment practices as portfolios, individual conferences, and written and verbal explanations of students' work are much more realistic and accurate measurements of children's progress. The Montessori class has ongoing assessments, including observations, anecdotal comments, brief conference summaries, checklists, performance samples, portfolio entries, journals, learning team reports, and other measures of the child's abilities and disabilities. Teachers are constantly making individual assessments of children while they are actively engaged throughout the day. Assessments are not just cognitive in nature but focus on the whole child in areas such as social/emotional, physical and linguistic.

Currently our school is comparing NAEYC Standards and Criteria with our Montessori method. Our plan is to make a comparative report showing Montessori meeting and/or exceeding the NAEYC standards. Children in our environment are active learners and are productively engaged throughout our work cycle. The Montessori classroom with its' rich and rewarding methods is the most optimal learning environment for early childhood. We encourage each parent to come into a class to witness the effective methods in action.

References

Eliason, C. and Jenkins, L. (2008). *A practical guide to learning early childhood curriculum*. NJ: Pearson

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