

The Center for Young Children University of Maryland, College Park

Curriculum Statement

Philosophy: Real World Studies

The Center for Young Children's philosophy is based on the belief that young children learn best by firsthand explorations of their world. The idea that children experience intellectual growth by making discoveries and solving problems is one commonly held in the field of early childhood education. At the CYC we use what we call "**Children Study Their World**" to structure a learning environment which develops the skills of **inquiry, research, data collection, creative problem solving, reflection and respect for others**. We believe that if children develop the skills to study their world and grow through experience then we set the stage for life long learning, in and out of school settings.

The philosophical basis for this approach dates back to the early part of last century to philosopher John Dewey's theories of experience, community and democracy. Other influences on our approach include the developmental psychology of **Jean Piaget** and the educational psychology of **L.S. Vygotsky**. Early progressive innovators such as **Lucy Sprague Mitchell** (founder of the Bank Street College School for Children) and **Caroline Pratt** (founder of The City and Country School) serve as examples of progressive education that help to develop the whole child and are based on inquiry and experience. We also include current research in emergent curriculum and authentic assessment conducted and published by renowned early childhood professionals such as, Dr. Carol Seefeldt, Dr. Samuel J. Meisels, Lucy Calkins, Judy Jablon, Judy Harris-Helm, Lilian Katz and Sylvia Chard.

Our curriculum that includes the Learning Environment and Real World Studies (**RWS**) is compliant with the content standards of the **Maryland Voluntary State Curriculum**. Furthermore, we assert that the RWS approach satisfies the standards in a meaningful, complete and effective manner. See below for more on RWS and the Maryland Voluntary State content standards.

Real World Study Topics: Science and Social Studies

The study topics chosen are relevant to children's lives. They are topics that can be investigated first hand in the community and/or brought into the classroom. Teachers observe children to discover their interests and possible topics to study. Teachers ask themselves the following questions to determine the appropriateness of a study:

- Is it relevant to the world as the children know it?
- Is it meaningful to the particular children involved?
- Is it mindful - does it cause children to think?
- Is the knowledge gained from the study worth knowing?

Some examples of social studies topics are The Playground, Clothing, Libraries and Construction. Examples of science topics are Birds, Snails, Mealworms, Water and Bubbles. Some topics are both social studies and science, such as Babies and Bread. There are also occasions where teachers may choose a popular children's author as a literacy focus for a shorter study topic (Eric Carle, Tomie DePaola, Rosemary Wells, and Mo Willems).

The Structure of a Real World Study

- The driving force of each study is inquiry and investigation. Teachers often begin a study with an experience that will bring out what the children already know about the topic. Children will draw, talk and write about the topic.
- During this process it becomes evident what children want to know about the topic. The children will then research through observation, experimentation and investigation. As information is gathered, the class is recording information on charts and graphs and discussing the topic in large and small group meetings.
- In the end there is a cumulative experience that summarizes the knowledge gained in the study. Each study has its own unique cumulative project that will show what the children learned through the investigation of a Real World Study

Example: A Four-Year-Old Baby Study

- The children make a list of all the things they already know about babies.
- Children bring in baby pictures of themselves and talk about them to the group.
- Children draw pictures of their earliest memories.
- They discuss all of the things they want to know about babies and the teacher and children together make a list. The teacher uses questioning regarding initial consonants and sight word recognition as she writes the list.
- They decide to pose their questions to grown-ups. The class invites a series of parents with infants to come to the class to show their babies and answer questions. The families represent a range of ethnic backgrounds. The children come up with a list of questions to ask the parents. The babies spend time in the room so the children can observe their behavior.
- The children record the data they collect about babies in a manner that extends their mathematical thinking. The children make a graph to show what they learned these babies can do. They sort baby toys and clothing onto a real graph.
- They interview a teacher or parent who is expecting a baby.
- They taste baby formula and mashed bananas and record their likes and dislikes.
- They measure their feet with Unifix cubes and compare the size with the size of a newborn's feet.
- A display is made in the classroom with children's current and baby pictures and signatures.
- In the dramatic play area children use baby dolls to explore ideas about babies.
- They read and recite nursery rhymes at group meeting times. They read books and stories about babies.
- At the end of their study they make a class book to show all they learned.

Maryland State Voluntary Content Standards

The CYC is very conscious of holding ourselves to the same standards and accountability systems as our colleagues in public institutions. Therefore, it is our procedure to develop our curriculum plans to ensure that the Maryland State Voluntary Content Standards are being satisfied. As an illustration, below you will find some of the Pre-K content standards explored in the baby study. This is not a comprehensive list of the standards addressed in this study. It is meant to serve as an excerpt of the learning that occurred during the baby study.

Social Studies Content Standards

History (1) Distinguish among past, present and future time

Political Science (4) Identify the roles and responsibilities of being a member of the family and school (a) Identify roles of family members

People of the Nations and World (1) Identify similarities and differences in people and families (b) Recognize ways that individuals and families are alike and different, yet form a community

English/Language Arts Content Standards

Phonemic Awareness: (1) Discriminate sounds and words (b) Recognize that letters represent sounds (c) Identify and repeat initial sounds in words

Phonics: (1) Recognize that letters have corresponding sounds (a) Recognize similarities and differences in letter shapes

Fluency: (1) Engage in imitative reading at an appropriate rate (a) Listen to models of fluent reading (b) Recite nursery rhymes, poems and finger plays with expression (c) Develop beginning sight vocabulary of familiar words such as first name and color words

Vocabulary: (1) Develop and apply vocabulary through exposure to a variety of texts (2) Develop a conceptual understanding of new words (3) Understand, acquire, and use new vocabulary (b) Use newly learned vocabulary on multiple occasions to reinforce meaning

Mathematics Content Standards

Knowledge of Measurements: (2.1) Describe objects according to length (2.2) Make comparisons between several objects based on length

Knowledge of Statistics: (4.2) Work in a group to organize and display data concretely on a graph

Knowledge of Number Relationships and Computation: (6.1) Model quantities to 5 using concrete objects (.2) Recognize numerals to 10 (.3) Count to 10 using one-to-one correspondence (.4) Use ordinal numbers first and second (6.2.1) Identify sets with more, less or equal numbers (6.2.2) Identify the number of items in a set with 1 to 5 items

Process of Problem Solving: Use information to identify and define the question(s) within a problem

Organize, interpret and use relevant information

Verify the conclusion based on the data and the processes used

Essential Elements in Real World Studies

- Like the Baby study, the topics teachers choose for their class to study are in the “**Here and Now**”. Young children learn best when their intellect is applied to subject matter that they are familiar with, yet do not know or understand in depth.
- The teacher is in the position to facilitate the study so that the learners are motivated by what they already know and are inspired by their curiosity to investigate and learn more. Through this approach, children begin to understand how their world operates.
- Study topics are not determined in advance. Every class is unique. Teachers spend time observing the children to discover where their interests lay and plan study topics accordingly. Therefore, the curriculum at The CYC never becomes routine. On the contrary, the curriculum is fluid, flexible, alive and active. The curriculum is exciting because the topics are real and authentic .

Classroom Content Areas and Children’s Work Time

Much of the learning in the contents areas is a result of the in-depth studies as described above. In addition, the structure of the preschool and kindergarten day provides ample time for children's self-selected activities, a structural element in our curriculum that we call Work Time.

- Work time is for self-chosen work in the areas described content areas explained below. Decision making skills are developed as children work on self-initiated projects.
- Problem-solving skills are developed as children work together and negotiate space, materials and ideas.
- Long periods of each day are devoted to Work Time and children learn time management skills.
- As children choose work spaces in the classroom, teachers follow the children and engage with them individually and in small groups. The concept of scaffolding comes into play in these interactions at work time. Teachers can take children to another level in their thinking and skill levels by working with them in this individualized manner.

We consider this work time to be an essential and important component of our program at the CYC. The classroom becomes the children's workshop, with essential materials, space, and time and teacher encouragement at their disposal.

Below is a description of the philosophy and methods of teaching and learning in the content areas of literacy, mathematics, block building, dramatic play, visual art and music.

Language Development and Literacy: Content Area Domain

- The Center for Young Children has collected an impressive library of children's books. Teachers choose books for their class from this collection, their own private collections and public libraries. Each classroom is literature rich and the children are read to daily.
- Teachers often plan and carry out literature studies. A class may study an author or a genre such as fairy tales or poetry. Teachers utilize graphic organizers such as charts and graphs to analyze literature. Through analysis and discussion children become familiar with story structure and character development.
- To develop skills in the emergent reader, teachers create a print-rich environment in the classroom. The children are read to from big books as well as picture books. Kindergarten teachers utilize the methods of shared and interactive reading to teach word recognition and reading strategies.
- Children learn sight words throughout the day in many different curriculum areas. Teachers take dictation and model writing during whole group meetings incorporating essential practice with sound/symbol associations (phonics). Teachers make graphs and charts using simple and clear print. Teachers also use the methods of the Language Experience Approach which reinforces the idea that language is meant to be meaningful, useful and purposeful.
- Children's writing is coached on an individual level. A teacher may work with a three-year-old by listening to her tell about the string of letters she wrote under her drawing. The teacher is

confirming that the child's writing is important. A teacher may work with a five-year-old by teaching him the conventional spelling for words he has almost mastered on his own.

- Kindergarten children receive much individual instruction in reading and writing through work with predictable books and writing journals. Additionally, Kindergarten teachers provide group lessons that address phonemic awareness, grammar and other reading and writing skills.
- Kindergarten teachers implement small group Guided Reading lessons as developed by Pinnell and Fountas.

Mathematics Content Area Domain

- Each classroom provides purposeful mathematical experiences with real objects and high quality mathematical manipulatives such as Unifix Cubes, Cuisenaire Rods and Pattern Blocks. Children learn through free exploration combined with guided questioning and direction. Classroom environments are organized to provide many possible mathematical encounters.
- Through Real World Study investigations as well as everyday experiences, children will explore number concepts, classification, patterns, temporal concepts, spatial relations, measurement, estimation and arithmetic. Children also learn about mathematical symbols such as numerals through teacher demonstration and use during graph making, record keeping and data collection.
 - For example, if a class is studying snails, mathematical aspects of the study would include measuring the size of the snails, timing how long it takes a snail to move from one side of the table to the other, recording and counting the number of different types of foods snails like to eat and tallying the number of times a snail comes out of its shell.
- Teachers are aware of mathematical encounters that come up in the everyday life. Checking a date on a calendar, dividing up snack for the group, taking attendance, measuring ingredients for a cooking project, are some of the meaningful ways the need for mathematical thinking arises everyday.
- Kindergarten children do extensive work with word and story problems to develop logic, problem solving and creative thinking skills.

Block Building Content Area Domain

- Each classroom at the CYC is equipped with a full set of unit blocks. Through block building a child can develop self-confidence and the capacity to work alone or with others. Blocks provide opportunities for spatial exploration, the development of problem solving skills and the exploration of rhythm, pattern and design.
- Block building stimulates scientific thinking. As children build they observe, classify, compare, and test their ideas of what will happen. Scientific concepts such as gravity, stability and balance are learned first-hand as children work with blocks.
- Mathematical concepts such as size, relationships, shape, weight, and quantity are experienced through blocks. The unit blocks are a complete mathematical system. Each individual block is a derivative of the "unit" sized block. Therefore, children learn about relationships through concrete experience as they discover and built with the blocks.

- Blocks also can be utilized as an effective tool for reflection on aspects of their world children are learning about. For example, after a class trip to the playground, a group of children think about what they have experienced by building a playground in the block area.
- Teachers and children discuss their structures during Work Time. Children develop their speaking skills as they describe and explain their work with blocks. They use scientific, mathematical and architectural terms.

Dramatic Play Content Area Domain

- Another area of the classroom where children can recreate their life experiences is dramatic play. The tools of dramatic play are large hollow blocks, dress-up clothes, household props and open-ended materials such as fabric pieces and carpet squares.
- In dramatic play situations children recreate their environment through which they clarify their ideas about their world. Young children blend reality, fantasy and imagination to gain an understanding of new information and accommodate the new with the old.
- In dramatic play children can take on a role and see how it feels to be in control of an experience. They can assume the role of another and do what that person does.
- In play, children externalize their thoughts and emotions making them available for discussions and understanding.
- In the dramatic play area children develop the skills needed to work in groups. Individually they gain a feeling of self-confidence, competence and self-discipline. As children work in groups they learn democratic principles such as taking turns, sharing, cooperation, acceptance of others and responsibility.

Visual Art Content Area Domain

- Art experiences are integral to the cognitive and emotional growth of the child. For children, whose verbal skills are still limited, creating with a visual medium allows them to work out their reactions to the world and to order and reflect on experiences in an indirect yet thoughtful manner.
- Making art is a part of the children's everyday experience. The art materials are set up so that they can choose and take what they need and clean up independently. Along with these basics, teachers integrate other art making experiences into the curriculum depending on their individual interests and talents. Explorations into printmaking, weaving, and bookmaking are some examples of what individual teachers add to the following basic materials.
- **Easel painting:** The basic color set up consists of three primary colors and black and white. Teachers add other colors when appropriate. The paints are set out alongside a water container and a sponge. The children are taught how to wash their brush out in the water and dry it on the sponge before they choose another color. This encourages purposeful thought in choosing the next color. Children are shown how to mix colors on a mixing tray.

- **Drawing:** Most young children enter school having had many drawing experiences. We encourage continued exploration of representation through the elements of drawing such as line, color and design. Teachers seriously attend to the meaning behind the children's work through discussion. A wide variety of drawing materials are available at all times for the children's use.
- **Clay:** Children experience clay mostly with their hands. The manipulation of clay improves small muscle control of the hands and fingers. Clay is a calming experience. It is a real and natural material from the earth. It is also an authentic art material. Real artists use clay. Therefore, it is a material that can grow with children as they grow and their work can gain in sophistication with experience.
- **Collage:** Materials are categorized in labeled containers. Basic categories may be solid fabric, pattern fabric, transparent, rough and soft. These categories encourage the children to become attentive to the subtle differences between fabric and paper, patterns and solids, shiny and dull. This sharpens their sensory awareness and ability to categorize and make distinctions.

Music and Movement Content Area Domain

- Music is part of the everyday culture in our classrooms. Teachers and children sing songs at group time as well as transition times. Teachers occasionally use recorded music to teach children songs. We also have a wide selection of quality children's musical instruments that are used to explore rhythm, timing and patterns in music.

Assessment

The CYC uses The Work Sampling System developed by Samuel Meisels. The components are performance assessment, developmental guidelines and checklists, portfolio collection and summary reports. The Work Sampling System is based on seven domains of learning. The seven domains are Personal and Social, Language and Literacy, Mathematical Thinking, Scientific Thinking, Social Studies, and The Arts.

- The structure of the CYC curriculum accommodates the performance assessment aspect of Work Sampling. The teachers are experts at taking anecdotal notes during the children's work time, meeting times and everyday activities such as outdoor play and meal time. These notes are used to identify strengths and weaknesses in individual children as well as informing the teacher of trends in the group as a whole. Therefore, this information is used to inform instruction for the individual and the group.
- With the use of digital technology, an important aspect of performance assessment is the photography that demonstrates children's learning, interests and abilities. Teachers collect hundreds of images for each child. The images are organized according to the learning domains mentioned above. This documentation work then becomes digital portfolios that are comprehensive and in-depth.
- Families are provided summary reports of children's growth and development two times each year. These reports are also organized by domain and contain specific examples of children's growth as evidenced by the anecdotal and digital documentation that is collected.

Thinking, doing and reflecting

Our goal at the CYC is to develop in our children a style of learning that makes them deep and serious thinkers. Along the way they will learn all of the skills and information they need to excel in our society. They will learn how to read, write and spell. They will learn how to do arithmetic and read a map. And along with knowing these things they will also know how to do research and investigate. They will have confidence in their abilities to use resources. They will be clear thinkers, knowing how to get to the root of a problem and asking the right questions in order to efficiently problem solve.

We are very excited about the work the children do at the CYC. Teachers facilitate as children think, do and reflect. In all areas of the curriculum the children are guided in their efforts to understand their world and be a part of a caring learning community.

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