Montessori Cultural Curriculum

In a Montessori world the "Cultural Curriculum" includes science and much more, in a beautifully integrated way. Dan Filler (Director of Elementary) and Tamara Mount (Head of School) have bandied about for 5 years how to title this section of Progress Reports. Dan posits that science, geography, and history all fall under the umbrella of the Cultural Curriculum, because these three topics are deeply interconnected and these connections inform the interdisciplinary way we teach here at Hilltop.

When students study Egypt, Greece, and Rome they also study simple machines. The science of simple machines (including physics of pulleys, trajectories, etc.) is taught in this 'history' study, because the technological advances of these cultures helped shape the cultures themselves. As part of the human body study, students examine public health issues connecting science and human communities. For example, students look at how the stress of poverty impacts the long-term health of people living in poverty.

The study of biomes highlights how an understanding of science informs students' understanding of human cultures. It begins as part of the study called Sun and Earth in lower elementary. In this astronomy study, students learn about how the tilt of the earth in relationship to the rays of the sun creates arctic, tropical, and temperate zones on earth. Students learn the characteristics and locations of different biomes within these zones. Next, students learn how humans adapt to meet their needs in these different biomes. These adaptations, the types of foods people eat and the types of homes they live in, help create human cultures. When students study botany and biology, they study not only plants and animals, but also explore how we are dependent on them for everything from clean air, to food, to the cotton or wool clothing we wear. Students also look at how the action of human cultures impacts plants and animals.

Our current political climate highlights how science and human culture cannot be separated. Funding of scientific study, the use of science to shape policy, the trust we put into science are being questioned within our culture. Because of the science of climate change, the outcome of these current debates could have profound impacts on our natural world and future human cultures as we adapt, or not, to a changing climate. Science and culture cannot be separated, Dan says.

Tamara gets it and agrees, yet worries that parents, not as steeped in the Montessori lingo, might not know this subtlety. When they read the word "Cultural", they are not thinking about science. And when we revised the format for the Progress Reports several years ago some curriculum description, that included science, was lost in the interest of efficiency and focus on the individual student's specific work. We no longer detail the robust science curriculum that includes:

- ability to form a hypothesis,
- ability to make thoughtful and accurate observations,
- ability to construct knowledge from observations, and

- understanding of the various fields of science.

For this reason, Tamara has maintained that the section of our Student Progress Reports that covers the vast array of lessons and activities under the science, geography, and history curricula should be titled "Science/Cultural". So now, for those of you who have students in the Elementary programs, you will be getting a progress report via email next week that includes the header of "Science/Cultural". Has Tamara worn Dan down? Convinced him of her case? He's not telling, but feel free to let either of us what you think!

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