

Parent Education Geography Night  
October 2, 2008

The elementary curriculum is not a direct continuation of the primary one, but is built on that basis. From three to six years old, children are naturally curious about their environment, and primarily through the use of the hand, we give them names for everything. Montessori children are well-known for their extensive knowledge of geography and often have made detailed maps of every continent by the end of their third year.

At six years old, there is a psychological shift toward interest in the how and why, and the reasons for everything. This is a natural period for the acquisition of culture. The study of geography is taught in the context of cosmic education; that is, the idea of interconnectedness that is central to Montessori education.

This is the age of imagination, and lessons are often presented in impressionistic ways, designed to pique the curiosity and satisfy the need to know. Dr. Montessori directed us to give children the universe, which she called “an imposing reality and an answer to all questions.” Cosmic education helps children realize that they are part of the universe and they want to know how they fit into it. If we teachers do our jobs right, we create a sense of wonder and arouse an interest in everything.

We start at the beginning. We read and talk about creation stories from ancient cultures and times as a preface to the modern theory from our own culture, the story of the Big Bang. From there, we provide lessons in all the cultural subjects- history, zoology, botany and geography. The materials for geography are particularly rich and provide ample opportunities for discovery and lead to further research, as you will see. Shelf materials are only part of it- the Earth itself is paramount in providing invitations to explore. We use the school grounds extensively and take field trips- last week’s field trip to the Falls of the Ohio is one example of how we try to give the universe to the children- literally!

Political geography is another subject that again returns to the connections and interdependence we have with our fellow humans. Here the shelf materials are the jumping-off point for a myriad of further cultural studies. Since you will only see the geography shelf materials tonight, I want to make reference to how the other subjects are connected to it.

History is inextricably linked to geography, and the series of science experiments reveal the natural forces that shape our planet on an ongoing basis. Timelines are fundamental to teaching the current configuration of land and water on earth, and the tiny, tiny strip at the end of the geographical timeline that illustrates the brief existence of life again helps children understand their own place in the world.

Botany studies provide knowledge not just of plants and their parts, but their relation to the rest of the planet, everything from seed travel to the fossilized remains from ancient tropical seas right here in Kentucky. Children at this age are fascinated by animals. They love to give animal reports to their peers, and the information always includes the animal's geography, the place and environment it inhabits. Indirectly, they are discovering information about biomes, leading to further lessons and discussion.

Geography is often a major focus on Earth Day, a springtime activity in lower elementary where students delve into a particular interest and then present the results of their research in a more formalized situation. Whether the topic is the environment, pollution, energy, or an endangered animal, geography is always included.

Geography is in fact so interwoven into the Montessori curriculum that it is somewhat difficult to isolate it, aside from some of the material we will show you tonight. I will close with a quote from Montessori herself: "Every map speaks eloquently of the work of the explorers and pioneers, who underwent hardships and trials to find new places, rivers and lakes, and to make the world greater and richer for our dwelling."