

The Curriculum of The Chicken Coop School

Process and Content

An education can focus on the specifics of what the child has learned, or the skills that they have learned that will enable them to learn more. Traditional education focuses on the specific content instead of the skills. For example, in a government class, the children may study the Constitution. They are expected to know a certain amount of information related to the Constitution, and they are tested to insure that they have learned that information. The report card is typically based upon their mastery of the subject matter.

The curriculum at the Chicken Coop School is instead focused on the mastery of skills that will enable children to learn more about whatever they want, whenever they want. This doesn't mean that the children do not study and master materials. They do. This mastery is demonstrated in the projects that they complete throughout the year. The focus, however, is on being aware of *how* they are learning, as well as *what* they are learning. For example, when studying the Constitution, the children may paraphrase parts of the actual document as a study of how to make sense of a difficult text. The skill that is being taught, and that we hope the children will take with them, is that when faced with a difficult text, paraphrasing is one skill that can be used to understand it. Social skills that facilitate a group to function positively enable people to learn from each other throughout their lives. These skills are as critical as more academic ones.

With this in mind, there are certain topics that simply must be mastered in order to successfully function in a democracy, a society, or in a relationship, and an education that neglects these ideas is simply inadequate. These ideas include:

- How a democracy works
- How various organizations of people work
- How to take in information, and how information influences people.

Furthermore, in order to create a democracy, a society, or a relationship, people have to think about what it means to be kind, and how to influence and create change. They have to think about themselves in the democracy, and how a democracy, a society, and a relationship works for them and their particular needs to bring them happiness and fulfillment.

How We Do It

There are many ways to meet the aforementioned goals. Even when intending to study process, a curriculum still needs a topic or a matter to study, and structures in place to support the learning. Some of the structures are the Chicken Coop include:

Weekly Article:

Every weekend, the students are given an article that supports or further explores the ideas discussed in

class. The articles often come from current news stories. Sometimes they are from magazines. Care is taken to insure that the students are exposed to multiple points of view, and that they learn to question the sources.

Weekly Essay

The weekly essay frequently relates to the article. The students are asked to write an essay that takes a stance on an issue. They are expected to support their thesis with reasons and examples.

The Social Studies Curriculum of the Chicken Coop School is based on the two fundamental ideas of the “Society” and the “Self.” .

Regular Conversation and explicit study of Group Dynamics

Learning is often social. Through discussions, abstract ideas become clear. Some people are more confident conversationalists than others. It is the responsibility of the teacher to create situations in which everyone can participate in conversations. This includes having small group or partnered conversations instead of whole group conversations, varying the format to allow people to formulate their thoughts, and finding ways for the quick students to express their ideas without stiling the other students. Furthermore, it is essential that the teacher maintain a professional and respectful environment, where children do not interrupt each other, and where they are encouraged to engage in real dialog. Children can learn to listen more carefully when a soft-spoken person is talking, and can learn to reign themselves in if they are dominating a conversation.

An annual independent study

The students research and write a paper on a topic that is interesting to them. Students use the local library, and do extensive research, both on the Internet and in books.

The Substance of the Year Long Studies

As the children study at the Coop for two years, the curriculum is on a two year rotating schedule. In one year, we study Society. In the second year, we study reality.

The Society

Democracy necessitates an informed citizenry. People must know to question their government, seek information from multiple sources, and make reasonable and logical policy decisions. In order to facilitate this understanding, a year is devoted to understanding the roots of The United States Government, and the founding of the country.

The students study American Democracy while creating their own Utopian communities. The students create models of their utopias, and written materials explaining their ideal world. As they are working to understand the United States Declaration of Independence, they are penning their own declarations for their own society. They decide what sort of government they would want in their society, and what sorts of food and agriculture.

As the students form their worlds, other ideas are introduced, which they are encouraged to explore. For example, how do different societies teach their children to behave? The children explore different

methods of child-rearing, and decide which they would prefer in their utopias. Ideas of labor, material possessions, body adornment, food, religion, world-view, and art are always explored.

During this year, in addition to their general literature studies, the students read The Giver, which is a marvelous piece of Adolescent Utopian Literature by Lois Lowry, and Anthem, by Ayn Rand. In addition to being beautifully written, both of these books lend themselves to conversations about how groups of people form their own communities.

The following list outlines the topics generally covered during the year that is focused on the Society:

Understanding Society	
Ideas covered	How they are covered
The form and structure of the US government	The students make diagrams and read about it. They also read about governments and decision making bodies of other societies, and decide which organizational structure works best for them.
How a bill becomes a law	After extensive reading and conversations, the students make board games that demonstrate the path that a bill takes on its way to become a law.
The Declaration of Independence	The students read and paraphrase the Declaration of Independence, analyzing it for rhetorical and persuasive devices that the authors used. Attention is given to the notion that the American declaration of independence was a an act of rebellion against the ruling party.
The Constitution and the Bill of Rights	We use the text <u>A Kid's Guide to America's Bill of Rights</u> , which is a wonderful book written for Middle School Students. It makes clear how important the Bill of Rights is to them, in their daily lives. They read the Constitutions of other countries and societies, including some modern organized communities, and they decide which ideas would be included in their own Constitution and Bill of Rights
The Philosophies and the Philosophers of Early America	The students read from a variety of Early American writings, including Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and Thoreau. They respond to these reading through extensive conversations, as well as through written and artistic projects. For example, the children often design their own Thoreau's cabin.
How do societies change themselves	This investigation can go in many different directions, depending upon the interests and excitement of the students. Some years we've explored: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The American Revolution, -The French Revolution -The Civil Rights Movements -The Indian Revolution and Gandhi

	We also frequently read articles about technology, that demonstrate how societies change even without meaning to.
The multicultural nature of the world	Once each week, the students explore an idea from a variety of different cultural points of view. For example, the teacher will find several articles about coming of age rituals from different countries. We explore the ideas together, and then the children think and talk about which cultures interest them. Care is taken to avoid judging or criticizing different points of view. Typically, many topics are explored, including laws and rules, body adornments, art, food, language, and religion. We often explore one idea from many different cultures.

Reality

Every other year, the students engage in a study of “Reality.” In order to provide some structure to this broad and nebulous topic, we generally begin our with the classical philosophers, and work our way through them. We have predominantly used two texts. One is Sophie's World, which is a history of Philosophy as explained to a 13 year old girls. Another is “The Ethics Workbook” from www.ethicsineducation.com, which is an interactive an engaging exploration of the history of ideas. There is a lot of room this year to explore the interests of the students.

Ideas covered	How they are covered
What is reality	We discuss some physics and Quantum mechanics. We explore the notion that individuals create their own interpretation of reality.
What is reason and logic?	We explore logic from a mathematical point of view. We discuss how we know what we know, and if logic is the only way to know anything.
What is matter?	The students are introduced to the periodic table, and to the ideas of matter
How did we all end up, walking around on this planet?	We explore the Big Bang, the formation of the earth, and the evolution of the human animal.
What is right and wrong?	We discuss the early Greek philosophers, and the struggles they had with moral relativity.
What is just?	We look at the current criminal justice system, and where and how it is just and unjust. We talk about consequences, rewards, and punishments, and talk about the roles that they play in shaping human behavior.

While the second year lacks the projects of the “Society” year, the conversations are always lively and interesting, and the children can generally articulate ideas that they have come to understand as a result of their studies.

Writing

At the Chicken Coop School, the children spend time every day working on writing that is important to them. We use the process approach to writing. This approach is not only about learning to express one’s own thoughts in writing; it is a thorough study of words and language- both spoken and written- and how they are used.

An understanding of language is essential for many reasons. With a competence in language, people have the ability to persuade others, and thereby impact their own political, social, and economic reality. When people have the words and the techniques to articulate their experiences, ideas, and understanding of the world, they are able to discuss them.

With an understanding of the power of words, and a facility with language, people are able to name, and thereby influence their world. Those who are not proficient with language are subject to the influence of every word they encounter, and they are less able to see where others are trying to persuade them. We cannot understand and act upon ideas or a reality that we do not know how to express.

So the students write everyday. They gather ideas, revise their drafts, edit, and publish works that matter to them. While, as a class, they engage in studies of various genres, the children choose the topics that they will explore. This guarantees that they will always be writing about something that matters to them. Our studies help them to portray their thoughts and experiences as accurately as possible. The children emerge with knowledge to convey their ideas well, as well as confidence to do so.

Literature

The children have 2 one hour periods of literature study each week. During this time, they analyze and discuss a book that they read together. They learn how to search for and understand symbolism, recognize the strategies that an author uses to engage a reader, and to read carefully to notice the subtleties of a text. They are also taught to take responsibility for a literary conversation, and are expected to come to class prepared for a discussion.

The reoccurring theme in the books is an effort to help the children to see the world from a different point of view.

During the course of the time the children study at the Chicken Coop, they always examine Tuck Everlasting, by Natalie Babbitt, Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry, by Mildred Taylor, To Kill a Mockingbird, by Harper Lee, and The Canning Season, by Polly Horvath, and Anthem, by Ayn Rand. Many years, they study The Giver, by Lois Lowry, and The Pearl, by John Steinbeck. They also study a play by Shakespeare, a series of short fiction, and poetry.

Math

The Chicken Coop follows the Connected Math Curriculum of the University of Michigan. The children are taught the skills necessary to work with whatever problem they encounter. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, and the State of Massachusetts endorse this curriculum. It is the curriculum favored by many of the progressive and inquiry based schools in the nation. In addition to teaching at the Chicken Coop, Theresa teaches SAT math at local prep schools. She is familiar with algebra through quadratic equations, and is able to support the student's learning to that point.

The students also use mathematical thinking to help them to interpret numbers that they encounter in the news. For example, when the President unveiled his budget, the children made graphs to more fully understand his proposal.

Science

The Science Curriculum is a standard survey course, designed to expose the children to the ideas that are essential to scientific thought. The students have approximately 2 hours of Science each week, and their class includes extensive lab work and experiments. The following topics are always covered:

- The Scientific process
- Introduction to the Periodic Table
- Human Evolution
- Basic Biology and botany
- Classification of organisms
- Environmental Science and the role of the human on the Earth

Farm Life

One of the most interesting aspects of the Chicken Coop School is that it is situated on a working organic farm, where both labor and food are celebrated. In several formal ways, and in an infinite amount of informal ways, the farm impacts the curriculum. At least once each week, the students engage in a structured work project. The students are also responsible for the day to day up keep of the farm and the classroom. They are responsible to bring in firewood and clean the room.

Simply because of our location, the students are constantly exposed to adults who are making deliberate and unconventional choices about their lives. This allows the students to consider many different ways of being and living.

Art

The art course is structured as a basic survey course. The students study both the history of art and engage in the creation of art. They explore various mediums, including drawing with pencils, paints, and using other materials, such as fabric. They have approximately an hour of art each week.

Music

The intention of the Music Curriculum is to get everyone making music together. There is basic instrument instruction available. The children have approximately an hour of music each week, with more available.