

Our Pedagogical Approach

In our organization, we place high value on honoring children's learning through play and inquiry. We are committed to providing opportunities for all children to be their authentic selves, to be invested in their own learning, and to develop a sense of belonging in the world. Even as infants, children take the driving seat and direct their interests toward their growth. In practice, this happens by harnessing the power of Emergent Curriculum, a pedagogical approach that encompasses actively listening, observing, investigating, documenting, and reflecting.

Emergent Curriculum inspires educators to integrate and interchange different roles in their teaching and learning. They build a community of learning alongside children, being their fierce supporters, advocates, and cheerleaders. Educators use observation and reflection of children's play and conversations to plan opportunities that encourage and challenge children's thinking, skills, and development.

Reflective practices involve a combination of experiences where educators engage in intentional critical thinking both individually and within the organization. These experiences allow educators to have a robust foundation for success with emergent curriculum, documentation, and family partnerships. Reflective practices can vary according to educator and classroom needs. Our organization supports reflective practice through various methods and systems.

Te'Whariki Inspiration and "Open-Concept"

One of our goals as an organization is to draw inspiration from various communities of learning to implement best practices and provide our children with the highest level of quality learning and care. Through the work of our Institute, we have had the privilege of visiting New Zealand, where early-learning standards are among the highest in the world.

Unique in its bicultural framing, Te'Whariki expresses a vision that all children grow up as competent and confident learners, strong in their identity, language, and culture. It emphasizes a multicultural foundation, our multicultural present, and the shared future we are creating. Te'Whariki encourages all children to learn in their own ways, supported by adults who know them well and have their best interests at heart. This vision is expressed in different ways as early learning services work with parents, whānau, and communities to design and implement a program of learning and development that reflects local priorities and supports each child's personalized learning pathway. The underpinning concept of the whāriki (mat) enables and supports this diversity.

Seattle Preschool Program

The Seattle Preschool Program (SPP) is a high-quality, evidence-based preschool program offered by the Seattle Department of Education and Early Learning (DEEL) in partnership with a network of preschool providers throughout the city, including both community-based providers and Seattle Public Schools. Additionally, SPP supports incoming kindergarteners by developing pre-academic skills and fostering social-emotional growth. SPP is funded by the voter-approved Families, Education, Preschool, and Promise (FEPP) Levy and aims to eliminate opportunity gaps in kindergarten readiness while providing access to high-quality early learning.

Team Teaching, Meetings, and Planning

As we value leadership in community and learning in relationships, your child will have an assigned primary educator and a team of support faculty who will connect with them throughout the program year. Primary educators collaborate and share responsibility for planning curriculum, communicating with families, and documenting learning as a team. Mentor educators work alongside teaching teams to provide additional support. Each team has time outside of the classroom to engage in reflection and plan the emergent curriculum.

Family Connections

Each family will have opportunities to meet with their educators both one-on-one and as a classroom group throughout the year. These opportunities include 'Get to Know You' conferences, developmental conferences, family gatherings, and ongoing project work. These interactions foster strong connections and support a collaborative learning environment.

Cooperative Assessments

In alignment with our values of relationship-based learning and emergent curriculum, each family will participate in cooperative assessments with their educators throughout the year. These assessments include health screens, Program Quality Improvements (PQIs), and Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQs). These assessments ensure the well-being and developmental progress of each child, creating a supportive and comprehensive learning environment.

Communities of Practice

Hilltop educators engage in professional learning communities to enhance their skills as leaders and advocates. They participate in these communities twice a month, focusing on areas such as child development, child behavior, emergent curriculum, and equity work. Current Communities of Practice include publication, presenting, and coaching/consulting. These opportunities for growth and collaboration help educators stay at the forefront of early childhood education practices.

Curriculum and Reflective Practice

We believe that curriculum is everything that happens during our time together with the children. By being in community and learning from each other, educators spend a great deal of time in reflective teaching practice:

- Observing as children play and interact with each other
- Engaging in meaningful conversations
- Using the environment as the third teacher
- Designing curriculum based on their observations

Our observations and conversations guide our curriculum as we create customized opportunities for children to deepen their thinking, represent their understandings, and encounter new perspectives. Child-led and community-led investigations may last an hour, a day, a week, or may develop into an in-depth investigation that spans several months. In this kind of responsive curriculum, children's and community's enthusiasm fuels the learning process, while educators offer provocations and activities to extend the children's work, describe the work through pedagogical documentation and learning stories, and gather family perspectives on their child's experience.

Observe and Listen

- Educators actively listen while engaging with children during play, mealtimes, transitions, and exploration
- Educators notice trends and themes amongst the children
- Educators gather notes, pictures, video, or audio from these interactions

Reflection and Study

- Educators share their observations with other educators and children to continue making meaning of children's play
- Educators consider what they know about child development, individual children's approaches/styles, group dynamics, family values/culture, the environment, and current research and practice
- Educators seek families' perspectives on children's work and development
- Educators document these shared observations in the form of stories of children's play

Planning the Curriculum

- Educators make short-term and long-term plans for curriculum based on their original and ongoing reflections
- Educators consider each child's development while providing future opportunities for growth, risk-taking, and investigation
- Educators plan for an environment that provides opportunities for testing hypotheses, natural and guided responses to children's actions, and responsiveness to topical and underlying themes

Pedagogical Documentation

Pedagogical documentation is a way to honor and record children's experiences while making Emergent Curriculum visible for children, educators, faculty, and families. Educators are intentional in how they use note-taking, observations, and collaboration with children to create aesthetically engaging projects that provoke, inspire, and challenge children in their learning process and development.

- Honoring Children's Experiences: Documentation is used to record and celebrate the unique experiences of each child.
- Making Curriculum Visible: By documenting the learning process, educators make the Emergent Curriculum visible and accessible to children, educators, faculty, and families.
- Intentional Note-Taking and Observations: Educators carefully observe and take notes on children's interactions and activities to inform and enhance the learning process.
- Collaborative Projects: Educators work with children to create projects that are both engaging and educational, fostering creativity and critical thinking.
- Inspiration and Challenge: Documentation serves as a tool to inspire and challenge children, encouraging deeper engagement and development.

Documentation can also be used as a learning tool for training within our organization and the larger community. The process of documenting learning integrates reflective practices and channels them into physical forms, connecting different aspects of the children's learning process.

Forms of Documentation

- Individual and Collective Learning through “Learning Stories”: Our organization is inspired by the early learning centers of Aotearoa New Zealand and the Te Whariki approach of pedagogical narration. This process goes beyond developmentally assessing children. It deeply reflects and lives our values of learning in relationship by honoring children as their authentic selves and inspiring educators to tap into their curious minds and genuinely share children's learning stories.
- Journals: Each child receives a journal that holds projects from throughout the year, which children and educators can add to as they see fit. Journals can go between home and the classroom, allowing families to add to the journal if they choose.
- Weekly Emails: Each week, families will receive an email from educators about the learning that happened during the week, along with reminders, what to expect for the upcoming week, and other organizational updates.
- Blog Posts: Educators have the opportunity to create blog posts for our website that can be viewed by other educators, families, and our larger community. Blog posts can cover a classroom or child observation, a topic in child development that an educator feels passionate about, an experience, or a recent training.
- Documentation Boards: Provide a visual representation of learning for children, families, educators, and faculty.
- EDUCA: An interactive learning platform that provides space for educators to gather and share learning stories with families, as well as serving as a learning assessment tools.

Learning Environment

We provide a rich learning environment with curricula that are developmentally appropriate for the specific ages in each classroom. Our flexible daily routine allows children to advance at their own pace. We strongly believe that learning happens through play. Learning and exploring are hands-on and facilitated through interest areas. Our program is designed to enhance children's development in the following areas: creativity, self-expression, decision-making, problem-solving, responsibility, independence, and reasoning. We encourage openness to diversity and the ability to work and play with others.

Developmental Screening

To coincide with curriculum-based assessments, we monitor each child's achievement of developmental milestones, share observations with families, and provide resource information as needed for further screenings, evaluations, and early intervention and treatment. The developmental screening process is collaborative, involving families and conducted in conjunction with the child's primary educator and health, education, and early intervention consultants. Developmental screening is conducted with written consent from the child's family.