

Designing an Integrated Curriculum for Preschool

Greg Tabios Pawilen*, Jaeson P. Arre, Eloida F. Lindo

University of the Philippines, Diliman, Harris Memorial College, Taytay, Rizal

Abstract

Integrated curriculum is a popular curriculum design used in organizing preschool curriculum. This study aims to analyze how teachers design an integrated curriculum. Specifically, it describes: (1) how do teachers plan an integrated curriculum; (2) what common themes are used; and (3) what factors are influential or considered in integrating the curriculum. Since the study was conducted in a Christian school, it also analyzes the influence of the Christian faith in the curriculum. Curriculum analysis and focus-group discussion with preschool teachers and administrators were done to gather the necessary data for the study. The results of the study show that the thematic approach is dominantly used in integrating the curriculum. The themes usually derived from big ideas or topics related to science, social studies, and some concepts and activities that are interesting to the learners. Several factors are also found to be influential in designing the curriculum. The study also found out that Christianity has a great impact or influence in designing the curriculum. Biblical stories, and Christian values are always integrated in the selection of sub-topics and activities in the curriculum.

Keywords: Integrated curriculum, Christianschool, preschool, thematic approach

Introduction

Throughout the world, especially in industrialized countries, preschool education is expanding very fast (Boocock, 1991). Consequently, there is an increasing concern

* Corresponding author, gregpawilen@yahoo.com

and a growing demand to provide quality early childhood education for young children (Clinton, 1996; Curtis and Carter, 1996; Gardner 2000). In pursuit for quality early childhood education, the curriculum is at the heart of scholastic discussions among early childhood educators around the globe. The design and implementation of the curriculum are agreed to be significant contributors to quality in childcare and kindergartens (NAEYC, 2005). As noted by O'Connell (2006), extensive research has consistently shown that quality preschool programs improve not only readiness to learn, but also social skills that will help children for a lifetime.

This study was conceptualized to contribute to the pursuit for excellent curricular practices for improving and developing the delivery of kindergarten education. Specifically, this paper aims to analyze how teachers design an integrated curriculum for kindergarten in a selected Christian school. This paper focuses only to the kindergarten level that caters to the needs of young children within the age range of four to six. The study was conducted in the first kindergarten school in the Philippines which is one of the first proponents of designing integrated curriculum for preschool in the country.

The idea of integrating the curriculum is not new, yet it remains to be the most popular way of designing many preschool curricula. More teachers are becoming excited about designing an integrated curriculum. The excitement comes from witnessing the learners become more active and interested on the learning process. Teachers who are trying their best to design an integrated curriculum are committed to the idea of providing a type of learning that is connected and relevant to the life of the learners. The increasing number of new knowledge and skills discovered in every day provides an immense challenge to make the school curriculum relevant and responsive. There are also specific competencies and content standards that are important to teach in every subject but with limited time, it is almost impossible to teach everything. Through curriculum integration, several important concepts and skills that need to be taught to the learners can be meaningfully and interestingly

learned in the school curriculum.

What is curriculum integration?

Curriculum integration can be defined in many ways. For example, Beane (1997) views it as an approach that uses student's questions to generate the curriculum while Jacobs (1997) views integration as a form of curriculum mapping that allows horizontal (within one grade level) and vertical (K-12) integration of contents. Fogarty (1993) on the other hand presented a continuum of her view of what is curriculum integration by presenting ten various ways of integrating the curriculum.

It can be observed that many of the experts' definition of curriculum are based on results of various observation of the process on how teachers do curriculum integration. However, there seems to be a common understanding among the experts that curriculum integration starts with a unifying theme—which is usually a question, name of a place or object, an activity or important event, problems and issues, projects, abstract concepts and other things that might be interesting to both teachers and learners.

The product of curriculum integration is an *integrated curriculum*. Erickson (2001) refers integrated curriculum as a variety of disciplines sharing a common conceptual focus. It utilizes themes for organizing contents and activities, combines of two related subject areas, and emphasizes on relationships and interrelatedness of concepts and skills under a flexible time schedules. In the context of preschool education, an integrated curriculum is a product of a *learner-centred education* that emphasizes the importance of considering the learner's interest, culture, needs and learning styles in integrating the elements of the curriculum.

Why is curriculum integration important?

Drake (1998) said that the world requires the use of holistic, integrated skills and competencies rather than discrete competencies and isolated skills, and the emphasis

of education should be on the ability to solve problems and apply them in an ever-changing context. People interact with parts of the world at various times. Every activity in man's life is interrelated and interdependent. Integration recognizes the interconnectedness of people's ideas and how such connections make knowledge more meaningful. It works to facilitate children's ability to make connections that represent the world as accurately as possible.

Children need help to bridge the world of the school to the larger community in which they live. This means that school curriculum includes activities in which learners gain knowledge that are applicable to real life. It is also important that the curriculum is relevant and responsive to the needs of the society. Learners must find themselves part of the process of solving a problem or issue to improve their own community (Martinello, 1994; Nagel, 1996). Through curriculum integration, all learners become contributing members of the community and make connections with their work and the outside world.

Charlesworth (1997) and Lind (1997) observe positive benefits of integrating Science and Mathematics in the preschool curriculum. Accordingly, through integration the learners are able to understand important concepts and acquire important skills in an interdisciplinary perspective. It also enables young children to see the connection of science knowledge to different subjects and understand the application of science in other disciplines. This is because curriculum integration dissolves subject boundaries to assist students in making connections between disciplines, and to help them solve problems on their own through research and critical reasoning. It also addresses the preferences of children with different learning styles and the various learning conditions that they want (Fogarty, 1993).

Curriculum integration helps learners in developing skills to retrieve faster information by organizing related concepts into themes. It helps children perceive learning as a whole by figuring out how various ideas, issues, and skills are all can be connected to enrich depth and breadth in learning. In a study done by Kellough

(1996), curriculum integration is based on brain-based research by connecting knowledge from the different disciplines in order for the brain to make meaningful patterns that will enable it to understand and process knowledge. As a strategy, it uses a variety of resources to make connections between subject areas, ideas, skills, and perspectives.

What factors are considered in integrating the curriculum?

In planning an integrated curriculum, there are several things that need to be considered. Tyler (1949) includes understanding of the nature of the discipline as one of the major sources of curriculum. Hence, teachers need to have a clear understanding of the nature or distinct feature of the discipline that they wish to integrate. For example, Mathematics emphasizes on learning different skills and so with language and Science. Social science on the other hand puts more emphasis on learning concepts. Thus it requires a careful analysis of the scope and sequence, and what concepts and skills should be integrated in different subject.

It is important for teachers to examine the available resources, facilities, or instructional materials that are needed or can be used in implementing the integrated curriculum. Some themes require specific materials like toys, simple science equipments, audio-visual materials and outdoor facilities to implement. In integrating the curriculum, team spirit among teachers is important. Since the planning involves different subject-matter experts, their willingness to cooperate and share ideas on the content and teaching methods that will be used in the curriculum. Teachers should be willing to allot a regular schedule for planning the integrated curriculum.

It is also important that teachers should have understanding of the terms that are regularly used in integrated curriculum such as standards, competencies, theme, learning outcomes, learning experiences, instruction, and a common understanding of what a curriculum is. The time or schedule allotted for the implementation of the integrated curriculum is also important to consider. The planned schedule should

allow teachers to do team-teaching and conduct outdoor activities and other learning experiences that are required for the implementation of the integrated curriculum. The type of evaluation and assessment tools to be use is important in designing an integrated curriculum. It is necessary for teachers to have a shared philosophy and understanding on how to assess and evaluate the learning progress of the students.

Any curriculum innovation requires the support of parents and school administrators being part of the stakeholders of the school. The parents need to know what type of curriculum is taught to their children and they can be of help in implementing the curriculum. Support from parents and school administrators are needed to implement successfully the integrated curriculum. Hence it is important to consider it in designing an integrated curriculum.

What common approaches are used for integrating the curriculum?

There are several modes or approaches used by several authors in their attempt to integrate the curriculum. This supports the idea that integration is no longer new in the field of education, particularly in the area of instructional development. The adventure of integrating the curriculum keeps on providing excitement and interesting venues for teachers to explore more ways of presenting knowledge. The following modes and approaches were used for integrating the curriculum.

Drake (1998) identifies three approaches in integrating the curriculum. The interdisciplinary approach, story model, and process approach. Interdisciplinary approach is the integration of related disciplines using a single thematic unit. The story model uses stories to connect knowledge. This model develops a personal, cultural, and global story as the context for any topic being studied. While the process approach concentrates on organizing themes that enable the learners to develop process skills, communication skills, problem solving, critical thinking and creativity.

Wood (1997) advocates the use of a problem-based interdisciplinary approach to integrate the curriculum. In a problem based approach, the learners are exposed to

different lessons in problem solving involving real-life problems. By doing problem-solving activities, the learners are exposed to some practical situations or issues that are important to them and to their community. Similarly, Beane (1997) develops a collaborative planning model. Under the collaborative planning model, lessons begin from the student's questions and not from some predetermined topic.

Erickson (1998) develops a concept-based approach in integration. In this model, the essential understanding is how the curriculum is connected at its highest level. Instructional planners spend time deciding what is worth knowing and applying to the structure of knowledge.

Almost all models mentioned use the thematic approach of integrating the curriculum. The only thing that is different is the main focus of the theme. Some models give emphasis on human activities as the themes of study while others use different topics that are interesting to students. Themes can either be a concept, guided questions, activities, or standards and skills but the purposes and goals are all intended to provide an education that is holistic, meaningful, and relevant to the life of the learner.

The different models presented above represents different views on how integration should be done, emphasizing different aspects of curriculum to ensure a level of connection across different disciplines. These models may be different in nature and in ways of implementation but one thing is common to all of them. All these models have the same purpose of providing an education that is holistic and responsive to the needs of the learners, and relevant to daily life experience. Through these models, education is explored from a larger context to understand the world around and discover new ways of teaching and learning.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to describe how teachers design an integrated curriculum for preschool. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do teachers plan an integrated curriculum in preschool?
2. What are the common themes used for integrating the curriculum?
3. What factors are influential or considered in designing the curriculum?

Methodology

This study was conducted in a church-related preschool which is the first kindergarten school in the Philippines. This school is the training ground of many kindergarten teachers in various church-related preschools in the Philippines. The participants of the study include three school administrators, two former teachers, and two teachers who are teaching in the school for more than five years. The teachers are graduates of Bachelor's degree in Kindergarten Education while the administrators hold graduate degrees in Family Life and Child Development and Educational Administration.

The study uses document or curriculum analysis to examine the curriculum plans in order to know what type of themes are develop and how Christianity affects or influences in the design of the curriculum especially in selecting the content and learning experiences. Documents that were analyzed include curriculum plan of the kindergarten and preparatory level for the whole school year. The available old curriculum guide for the past 10 years was also analyzed. Kindergarten includes children with three to four years old and preparatory includes children from five to six years old. In analyzing the curriculum documents, curriculum themes, topics, and activities were noted.

To supplement the result of the analysis, two schedules of interview with the teachers and school administrators were done. The first interview focuses on how teachers plan an integrated curriculum, what common themes were used, and what factors are considered in designing the integrated curriculum. Problems related to their tasks of designing an integrated curriculum were also noted to support and answer the problems of the study. The second interview focuses on the discussion of

the results of the first interview. This allows other teachers and administrators to validate their comments and provide additional information to what were shared by other teachers. The interview was conducted through a round-table type discussion using the three major research questions as guide.

Results of the Study

1. How do teachers plan an integrated curriculum?

Planning an integrated curriculum is always an exciting adventure among teachers. As an important principle in preschool education, the child is considered as the center of the curriculum. Hence, the child's interest, nature and needs are carefully considered in planning the integrated curriculum. Based on the results of the study, the common approach used to integrating the curriculum is a theme-based approach where one broad topic or theme such as "My Family" (a study about the concept of a family, members of the family, needs, activities and relationships) is the organizing structure for teaching and learning for a period of time.

The result of the study shows that the design of the integrated curriculum follows the normal procedure for a thematic approach.

- (1) *Selecting or deciding a theme or a thematic unit* —the first thing that teachers do is to select the theme of the curriculum. Themes are selected from concepts or topics from different subject areas that are interesting to young children. The theme serves as the focus of teaching and learning for certain period of time. It is also the organizing center of the thematic web.
- (2) *Selecting topics from different subjects that are related to the theme* — teachers will develop a curriculum web where different concepts and skills related to the theme are selected. Topics in the curriculum web are selected from Social Studies, Science, Mathematics, Language, and Christian Values. It is important that topics selected should be relevant and connected to the

theme.

- (3) *Planning different activities that are related to the theme*—different activities are planned for each topic in the curriculum web. It is important that the activities should be interesting and appropriate to the level of the learners. Free-guided play, music activities, simple experiments and observations, outdoor activities, group discussion, storytelling, and individual activities are examples of learning experiences provided to the learners. Chapel services and prayer time are also included in the list for activities.
- (4) *Selecting instructional materials to be used*—materials that are used for actual teaching are selected. The use of authentic or real objects is encouraged. The school has adequate instructional materials such as print, audio-video materials, toys, and other equipments are provided for the children.
- (5) *Planning the schedule*—teachers will then divide the lesson into smaller units of study. Each topic is usually scheduled on a daily or weekly basis depending on the scope of the topic.
- (6) *Designing assessment and evaluation tools*—narrative reports that include teachers' observation on the performance and behaviour of each child in the classroom are used in evaluating the learners. Currently, the teachers are starting to introduce portfolios and rubrics for evaluating children's portfolio.

This type of planning process is highly influenced by advocates of integrated curriculum like Fogarty (1993); Erickson (1995) and Drake (1998). This type of approach is called a thematic approach because a theme serves as the source of topics and activities.

The results of the interview with preschool teachers revealed that teachers decide or choose the curriculum themes used for integrating the curriculum. The teachers

handling the classes collaboratively design the integrated curriculum to ensure uniformity and standard in the lesson. This requires cooperation and creativity from teachers. The challenge is always to design an integrated curriculum that is interesting and meaningful to the learners. The final copy of the integrated curriculum plan is submitted to the school principal for checking. After the final checking, the curriculum plan is implemented by the teachers. Teachers and young children consume one month or more to study one curriculum theme. Since the preschool program is structured, teachers allot specific period of time for implementing the integrated curriculum plan.

The interview also shows several problems that teachers encountered while planning the integrated curriculum. For example, some parents would pressure the teachers to put emphasis on academic skills such as reading, writing and mathematical skills that will prepare young children for Grade I. Another problem is with the administrators. Several administrators would like to put emphasis on topics related to science, reading, or activities as themes. The school requires textbooks for teaching therefore, teachers should align their themes with the textbook topics.

2. What common themes are used for integrating the curriculum?

The study found out that most of the themes selected by teachers are related to different subjects like Language, Science, Mathematics and Social Studies. Teachers select broad themes that can integrate all the subjects. Themes can also emerge from the interests or activities of young children in the classroom. This is the basis for an emergent curriculum, which—as the name suggests—involves the study of a topic that emerges from the interests of the children and may involve a short- or long-term, in-depth examination of that interest. For example, themes about animals or insects, modes of transportation, or other themes that require students to conduct simple experiments and observation. The following are the common themes that teachers used in integrating the curriculum:

- Self (emphasizing that God created human beings)
- Family (emphasizing Christian family values)
- Community (includes culture)
- Transportation and Communication Tools
- Plants (emphasizing that God created all plants)
- Animals (emphasizing that God created all animals)
- Heavenly Bodies in the Sky (emphasizing that God created the universe)
- Values (love, peace, honesty, and other Christian values)

Using title of children' stories or a book as themes for the curriculum is also popular in the school. These stories derived from biblical stories or popular children's books. The main purpose of using literatures as curriculum themes is to develop the habit of reading among young learners. Some of the stories provide rich concepts that children could learn and explore. Since most young children love to listen to stories, this will also provide an interesting opportunity for the children to share their favourite stories to their classmates. Several topics related to Language, Science, Mathematics, Social Studies and Music and Arts are selected to give contents for each thematic unit.

As mentioned earlier, a theme is studied by young children for one month, or per quarter. Series of activities are designed by the teachers to teach the theme to young children. Since the school is a church-based with emphasis on Christian education, biblical contents are always integrated in the several themes of the curriculum.

3. What factors are influential or considered in integrating the curriculum?

The results of the interview with the teachers and school administrators show that several factors were influential in the process of designing the integrated curriculum. These are:

- a. *Children's Interests* —Most of the time, young children's interest is the main source of curriculum themes, contents, and activities. Topics of their interest such as: insects, cars, toys, food, heavenly bodies, animals, sea creatures or how their body works are included in the curriculum web or sometimes they serve as themes for the integrated curriculum. Children's activities like play and art activities are also included thus making play as outstanding instructional means to capture children's interest.
- b. *Children's Textbooks* —textbooks are the source of many exercises and activities for young children. The school develops textbooks for preschool. These textbooks are recommended to be used by more than 100 church-related schools. Thus, teachers have the strong tendency to choose the curriculum theme and organize their lessons based on the topics from the textbooks. The unit titles of the textbook they are using are used as curriculum themes. Examples are the units in Science such as plants, animals, non-living things, or Social Studies units such as family, communities, beautiful places, and country.
- c. *Children's Story Books* —Their favorite story books sometimes serve as a springboard for the whole lesson or theme. This is similar to the literature-based approach in integrating the curriculum. Teachers who were trained in using this approach apply it in designing an integrated curriculum. For example, when the story of "Creation" in the Bible is used, teachers will integrate themes on land formations, bodies of water, heavenly bodies, plants, and animals.
- d. *Availability of instructional materials* —this delimits the teachers in designing the curriculum. Before the start of the school year, teachers are required to submit a list of instructional materials to be use in the school. However, there is not enough money to purchase the materials. Sometimes the materials needed are not readily available. However, the teachers are very creative in

improvising or utilizing indigenous materials.

- e. *Change of School Administrators* —for the past years, the school had four supervisors. Often times, each of the supervisors have their own priorities and views on what goals should be emphasized in the curriculum. Therefore, the contents of the curriculum are affected. For example, one of the past supervisors wanted to put emphasis on socialization skills by adding more activities in the curriculum. Another is an emphasis on basic skills of communicating, writing, and Math skills, therefore competencies were added for every topic in the curriculum web.
- f. *Teachers' Interests and Background* —traditional or seasoned teachers are most of the time comfortable teaching familiar topics or themes. This will save their time and effort in preparing activities, visual aids, and lesson planning. Some teachers also take time to innovate and design the integrated curriculum based on the children's interests and needs. Since the school is a laboratory school, it is a host to many student teachers who will have their practicum as a requirement for graduation. These student teachers planned their lessons in advance so that their supervisor can check their plans and their visual aids. This practice gives way for the lessons or themes designed by the student teachers to be the curriculum. To make sure that their plans coincide with the school curriculum, the teacher will check the topics they choose and the lesson plans they developed.
- g. *Christian Teachings* —Christianity definitely influences the teachers in designing the integrated curriculum. The Christian values like faith in God, forgiving, righteousness, honesty, self-control, loving other people, generosity, among others are taught as part of the curriculum themes. Selected biblical stories and Bible verses are also included in the integrated curriculum. Based on the result of the focus group discussion conducted with the teachers, the Christian faith is always considered in planning the lessons that are taught to

young children in school. The children are taught that there is a God that created everything in the universe and God wants all human beings to be good stewards of His creation. This message is always emphasized whenever teachers plan integrated themes in science especially when they teach topics related to the environment (like plants, animals and non-living things) and topics related to the human body.

According to the teachers, the parents of young children sent their kids to a Christian school because they want their children to learn in a Christian atmosphere and they want their children to know more about the Christian teachings. Hence it is expected that teachers should include topics about God, the Bible, and the Christian doctrines to the learners. Having prayers is also one of the major activities that teachers include when planning activities for the themes. Aside from these, Christian kindergarten schools have their own mandate from the church to teach Christianity to the learners. This is well included in the schools' philosophy, vision and mission and in the school curriculum.

These influential factors that were mentioned show that the persons involved in designing the integrated curriculum have a crucial role. This is somehow related to the idea of Print (1993) of a curriculum presage whereby the personalities, background, philosophy, and conceptions of all the curriculum workers involved influence the process of curriculum development. Although students' interest are considered in designing the curriculum, the teachers and administrators who will plan and translate these children's needs and interests into curriculum content and learning experiences play an important role. Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1872) earlier recognized the important roles of teachers in creating experiences and opportunities to fit in the nature of the child.

Children's interests are somehow considered in all the aspects of planning the integrated curriculum. This practice is very important when designing a curriculum

for young children. Rousseau's (1712–1778) idea in early childhood education as mentioned by Brubacher and Seiler (1947) considers the child as the center of the curriculum. Therefore looking at the interests and needs of the children are very important in designing the integrated curriculum. A good preschool curriculum should reflect the nature of the child as a learner who is naturally curious to discover and explore the environment that surrounds him or her. On the part of the school, the use of play as a method of instruction and the emphasis on designing a suitable learning environment or classroom for the learners are very important.

Conclusion

Designing an integrated curriculum as mentioned in the first part of this paper is an exciting journey in preschool education. This type of curriculum design is based on the findings of several studies that the human brain processes information in an integrated way. Several ways to integrate the curriculum are offered by different authors as mention in the review of related literature in this paper. These different ways to integrate the curriculum are united in one common purpose that is to provide an education that is holistic, meaningful, responsive, interesting and relevant for the young learners.

This study found out that the use of the thematic approach is the dominant approach that is used in the school. This approach enables the teachers to select themes are relevant and interesting to the learners. Most of the selected themes are topics that are related to the different disciplines. These themes are carefully selected by the teachers and administrators. However, since there are other approaches in curriculum integration, it would also be nice to try other approaches that will provide more learning experiences to young children.

In the process of planning the integrated curriculum, several factors like the interest of the learners, the teachers and administrators, the availability of instructional materials and children's textbooks are very influential. The study also found

out that Christian teachings are also very influential in designing an integrated curriculum. The thematic approach provides an opportunity for teachers to integrate the Christian faith and values to young children. Thus it includes biblical stories and verses, and other activities that are related to different Christian practices like praying.

Finally, an integrated curriculum design is important especially in preschool. This type of education is related in the way children learn and construct knowledge. This design of curriculum also allows the integration of different concepts and skills that are interesting and important for young children. In connection with church-related kindergarten schools, an integrated curriculum design provides an excellent opportunity for Christian values and concepts to be integrated and taught naturally in the curriculum.

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