

The Banyan Montessori Center

School Handbook

2012-2013

In collaboration with the Faculty of Columbia University and the Burmese Refugee Project

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School Information

Mission Summary

The Banyan Center is a not-for-profit Montessori-based learning environment that strives for academic excellence, independent intellect, and compassion. It provides an elite education to an international student body that includes children of Thai parents, children of Western parents, children of mixed heritage, and Shan Burmese refugee students from the Burmese Refugee Project. This diverse student body not only brings a diverse knowledge base to the classroom, it also fosters a rich cross-cultural exchange and understanding.

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School Structure

The Banyan Center is a Montessori-based school founded by the Burmese Refugee Project in conjunction with faculty of Columbia University. The Board of Directors oversees all strategic and governance issues. The Directress manages daily operations. The Banyan Center asks for input and feedback from parents, community members, teachers and students in all decision-making.

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Montessori Philosophy

Overview

Dr. Maria Montessori developed her approach based on years of classroom and child observations and the belief that education “is a natural process which develops spontaneously in the human being” (The Absorbent Mind). While traditional schools are places where children are considered mere empty vessels to fill, Montessori Schools are specially designed environments where teachers treat all students as unique individuals, fostering their innate curiosity and encouraging their lifelong love of learning.

Basic Principles

The following are basic principles that guide Montessori classrooms worldwide.

1. Respect for the child
2. The absorbent mind/autoeducation
3. Sensitive periods
4. The prepared environment
5. Multi-age classrooms

Teachers treat children as unique individuals who garner the same **respect** as adults. Unlike traditional classrooms where the teacher is considered the holder of knowledge, Montessori classrooms are developed as a learning community where teachers are students and students are teachers. The mutual learning process that occurs in Montessori classrooms enables children not only to gain practical skills and knowledge, but also build social capital by encouraging them to engage in dialogue with their peers. As the teachers model respect for the students, students will respond in kind. Treating others with respect will become a lifelong, ingrained trait essential for a positive and successful future.

The Montessori method is based on the belief that children have an **absorbent mind** and that we, as individuals, engage in **autoeducation**. Children under the age of six are in a stage of development when they have a heightened ability to absorb much of their surroundings. This stage is the most influential in a child’s life, having a major effect on their learning and growth. True learning can only occur when information is questioned, analyzed and assimilated. Without engaging in all of these processes, children are merely receptacles where knowledge may be dropped but soon forgotten. Education should be based on the understanding that children have an absorbent mind, and that they want to learn about their environment. The teacher, then, takes the role as a facilitator of the learning process. Autoeducation is the name of this concept, where individuals are self-directed, engage in purposeful work and control their own learning.

Children not only go through stages of development that affect their learning, but also have special **sensitivity periods** when they are attracted to specific stimuli. Children generally pass through these stages and periods at similar rates. The Montessori method requires teachers to respond to these changes by guiding each individual student through a carefully constructed environment dependent on the stage and period that he or she is in.

Students are inevitably more focused and engaged when they are interested in what they are doing. By responding to children's specific sensitivity periods and giving them more freedom to choose within a **prepared environment**, teachers are able to maximize student skill acquisition while they become more invested in their education. Preparedness is a key component of the Montessori method because it allows the environment to respond to the needs of each individual student. Available learning materials should not only be suited to a child's needs, but also be sequential in difficulty to provide constant challenge and self-correction.

Lastly, Montessori classrooms are **multi-age**, encouraging students to work together, build community and engage in peer modeling. This further develops the mutual process of learners as teachers and teachers as learners.

Montessori Curriculum Components

The Montessori Curriculum is based on the previously described tenants and involves an awareness of specific areas of learning.

Practical life involves children using materials to engage in daily living activities such as buttoning, lacing, scooping, pouring and categorizing. This enables them to practice concentration techniques and life skills that are essential for self-reliance. As children engage in these activities, they build confidence and gain satisfaction. This section of the curriculum includes control of movement, care of person, care of environment and grace and courtesy.

The Montessori classroom encourages students to further develop multiple senses. The prepared environment emphasizes different **sensorial** activities relating to sequence, volume and dimension. Sensory activities are the basis for greater understanding of abstract concepts and are thus essential for a critically thinking individual.

Similarly to the sensorial component of the Montessori curriculum, **mathematics** forms the basis for analyzing relationships and abstract concepts by dealing with more concrete matters at first. Tasks and activities vary, but involve multiple senses and encouraging students to look at number relationships from multiple perspectives.

The Montessori method unites all **language** skills under one umbrella, recognizing that they each relate to and influence each other. Both direct and indirect methods of language practice are utilized in the classroom depending on students' stage of development. Language is inherently involved in all of the activities in a Montessori classroom as students are encouraged to articulate their learning in a multitude of ways, helping students gain practice with fine motor skills and oral language. More direct instruction in reading and writing is introduced through a carefully thought-out program involving letter symbol exposure, letter sound practice and independent phonetic student writing. Eventually non-phonetic spelling and grammar are introduced, but first the importance of student creativity in language is emphasized.

Lastly, some schools explicitly mention the importance of **culture** in the Montessori curriculum, involving science, history, geography and foreign language. In many Montessori classrooms these are incorporated into other learning activities and tasks.

Admissions

Enrollment Procedures

Every family is required to complete an Enrollment Packet including previous school records, immunization records and a copy of the student's birth certificate. An open enrollment period occurs every year. In the event of over-enrollment, students will be chosen through a lottery system.

Approximately one-third of the students at the Banyan Center are from the local Shan communities. These children and their families have experienced torture and abuse in Burma/Myanmar and now face discrimination and exploitation here in Thailand.

Part of our mission is to provide the much-needed high quality education for these children so they have opportunity and choice in the future, unlike so many of their peers and family members. Currently, many of these children are 'stateless.' That is, they do not have citizenship in any nation, and are therefore not protected by any government. The Banyan Center is a safe space for these children to grow and develop into productive and active citizens with the skills to articulate their needs and advocate on their own behalf. Banyan Center staff works with nearby Shan communities and advertises school enrollment procedures through word of mouth. In the Montessori approach, learning is individualized and tailored to the student's needs. The Shan children have been performing above their age level on many educational tasks.

School Age

To enroll at the Banyan Center, students must be 3 years old by the time of enrollment. Students older than 6 years old before the time of enrollment are not eligible to start the school year.

Payment Procedures

School fees are collected on the first of every month by the School Director. The pilot school relies on donations for 30% of its revenue. Parents who wish to make a donation may do so at: <http://www.burmeserefugeeproject.org/>. The donation is tax-deductible in the US.

Withdrawal Procedures

If you wish to withdraw your child from the Banyan School for any reason, please contact the School Director immediately. If a student is withdrawn before the 15th of the month, they will receive a refund of half of their monthly school fee. If they withdraw after the 15th of the month, no refund will be given.

Responsibilities

As a learning community, we engage teachers, students, parents, families and community members in the daily activities and ongoing development of the Banyan Center. Teachers, school staff, parents and students are all expected to abide by the school's code of conduct and commit to their responsibilities specified below. Students, parents and teachers are required to sign a commitment form included in the

enrollment materials, ensuring that every member of the learning community is aware of their expected contributions. Every student, parent, teacher and staff member is a valued member of the community and deserves the respect of each person upholding their commitments.

Student Responsibilities

1. Respect the rights of others to study and learn.
2. Attend school daily unless ill or excused.
3. Be on time and ready to engage in learning activities every day.
4. Complete assigned work as and if instructed.
5. Arrive at school prepared.
6. Respect other students' property, classroom materials and classroom equipment.
7. Follow the school rules so that all students can learn in an environment most conducive to learning.
8. Cooperate with school staff and be a good school citizen by upholding the rules that everyone has agreed on.
9. Act as the connection between teachers and parents as necessary. This includes seeing that documents are transferred accordingly.

Montessori Ground Rules

The Ground Rules are the rules by which the children run the classroom. Lessons are given on a daily basis in regards to the Ground Rules by using role playing, role modeling and discussion. These responsibilities become part of each child's ability to be comfortable and have the freedom of movement and choice in the classroom.

Responsibility: The child must use the materials respectfully. That is, the child may not harm the materials, himself or others. The child may not use materials in a way that disturbs the activities of others in the environment.

Right: The child is free to work with any materials displayed in the environment.

Responsibility: The child may not work at or on a display shelf, as her presence there would obstruct other children's access to the materials. All pieces of the work must remain on the rug or at the table.

Right: The child may work at a table or on a rug, whichever is suitable to the work chosen.

Responsibility: The child restores the environment during and after an exercise. She is responsible for mopping up her own spills, rolling up her own rug, placing her chair under her place at the table, and returning her work to the appropriate spot on the shelf.

Right: The child has the freedom to use the room as her needs dictate.

Responsibility: No child touches the work of another without an invitation to do so. No child is allowed to interfere with another's learning cycle (this provides security for the child involved in an exercise to continue it too its completion). If

the child must leave her work temporarily, she can continue later confident that it will be as she left it when she returns.

Right: The child has the right to work unrestricted by others. She may initiate, complete, or repeat an exercise alone and without a break in her concentration cycle.

Responsibility: The child is not allowed to interfere or disturb an activity she has chosen not to join; this is her responsibility to the group.

Right: The child does not need to join a group activity. She may continue working with an individual exercise during group activities, or she may stand apart from the group as an observer of group activities without becoming an active participant.

Responsibility: A child is not forced or even encouraged to share work. Generosity develops from within as a child matures and gains self-security. With adequate materials and supportive ground rules, sharing comes naturally in cases where sharing is appropriate or necessary.

Right: The child may work alone.

Responsibility: The child's idleness is not allowed to disturb or distract others' activities

Right: The child is free to do nothing if she so desires. She may be learning by observing others, may be thinking, or may simply be relaxing.

Parent Responsibilities

1. Be familiar with the school handbook, including the school procedure, education methods and Montessori philosophy.
2. Ensure their children arrive on time every day. Consistent and on-time arrival is essential to the Montessori curriculum.
3. Provide transportation to and from school everyday.
4. Read all documents sent home by the teacher and school staff.
5. Schedule at least two parent-teacher meetings per year to discuss your child's performance and individual development.
6. Support learning at home by utilizing Montessori-influenced conversation and discipline and encouraging students to discuss school life and experiences.

Teacher Responsibilities

1. Arrive on time every day ready to teach and learn
2. Prepare the classroom
3. Observe and monitor student progress
4. Respect students as individuals
5. Engage in dialogue and learning activities with students
6. Organize any extra field trips or learning activities
7. Communicate with parents as necessary through newsletter information, daily interactions during drop off and pick up and parent/teacher conferences
8. Model school values and obey school rules
9. Take part in professional development opportunities

General School Policies

Attendance

Student attendance is key to success in school. Missed school days impair a child's ability to participate in learning activities fully. Attendance is also important for continued socialization, which is a major component of elementary education.

If a child is consistently absent, school staff will request a meeting with the child and their family to discuss the barriers to attendance and together develop a plan towards a solution.

Similarly, students are expected to be on time to school every day. Students who are late disrupt the educational environment, which is not upholding their commitment to respect other students' learning. Teachers and students show respect for each other by showing up on time and ready to learn. It is disrespectful to school staff and other students to be consistently late without articulating a legitimate reason. If a child is consistently late, school staff will request a meeting to discuss the reasons for their tardiness and develop a solution with the student and their family.

Release Policy

Parents/caregivers are expected to write the names of the adults allowed to pick up their child from school on the enrollment form. If a different person is to pick up a student, the parents/caregivers are asked to inform the school by phone or with a signed, written note.

Visitors

All visitors are asked to sign in with the director upon school arrival. Parents are encouraged to visit the school to observe their child or volunteer in the classroom or at the school at any time. If a parent wishes to speak formally with their child's teacher, he or she is asked to schedule an appointment outside of school hours.

Publicity

Enrollment forms include a press release document. Parents are asked to fill out the form accordingly. Occasionally the Banyan Center will submit photographs or videos to news sources or the school website.

Student Assessment

Student work is collected and added to individual portfolios throughout the year. Portfolios are reviewed by school staff with students multiple times during the year.

Field Trips

The Banyan Center emphasizes the importance of exposing students to the greater world and different environments. All field trips will be scheduled in advance and require permission from parents.

Attire

Any form of student clothing is acceptable at the Banyan Center. Keep in mind that the weather in the morning on the way to school is not always the same weather the student will experience midday at the school building. Students should be prepared to play outside in any weather condition – hot, cold, rain or sun.

Students are encouraged to use the toilet on their own, so clothing should be easily removed or unbuttoned.

Additionally, the Montessori approach encourages students to explore their surroundings. Sometimes this involves getting dirty! Students should always have a change of clothes available at the school. School staff will attempt to minimize damage to clothing, though parents should be aware that students are to take responsibility for their own clothing. It is a good idea to leave a change of clothes at the school.

All clothes should be labeled with the students' name.

School Property

School staff understands that sometimes students take home materials mistakenly. Please return any objects you find, as they might be necessary to complete a set of work materials. This situation is a good opportunity to teach a child about responsibility and respect.

Health

Health Policy

To avoid spreading illness through the school, we ask that all parents/caregivers abide by the following health policy:

1. Call the school if your child is ill.
2. Report all contagious diseases to the school immediately.
3. Keep your child home if he or she shows symptoms including, but not limited to, coughing, sneezing, runny nose, sore throat, fever or upset stomach.
4. Keep your child home if he or she shows symptoms that make it difficult to participate in daily activities or are difficult for school staff to monitor and respond to.
5. If a child becomes ill at school, school staff will contact the parents to pick him/her up.
6. In the event of minor accidents, staff will administer first aid. A report will be given to the parent of the child upon school pick up.
7. In the event of a serious accident determined by school staff, students will be taken to the hospital and parents will be called immediately.
8. All children attending school are assumed to be fit enough to play outside

School staff trusts parents to exercise their best judgment regarding keeping ill students home or sending them to school.

Medications

In order for staff to distribute medication, parents must fill out the Consent for Medicine Administration form. This can be received from the school director. Staff can only administer clearly English labeled medications with the student's name. The office will keep a written record of each dose.

Sun/Mosquito Protection

Montessori philosophy emphasizes the importance of exposure to the outdoors. Students have the choice to engage in learning activities both inside and outside the physical school building. As such, students should come to school prepared for the option of being outside. We recommend the following for sun protection measures:

1. Students should wear sunscreen. Please send sunscreen with your child to be left at school and reapplied as necessary
2. Hats are acceptable to wear at any time
3. Students can bring mosquito repellent to keep at school and use as necessary

Safety

Search and Seizure

School staff members have the right to search student belongings if there is a threat to the health, safety and welfare of all students and staff.

Safety Rules

The Banyan Center staff, with the help of students, created a list of classroom and playground rules to ensure student safety. Failure to abide by these rules may result in disciplinary action. Students, teachers and visitors are expected to honor the rules so as to respect everyone's right to a safe space. The following are some of the sample rules in place, though the official rules are developed in conjunction with input from students.

Classroom Rules

1. Students must when in the school building.
2. Students must clean up after themselves and put away materials when leaving a workspace.
3. Students should keep their hands and bodies to themselves.
4. No violence or pretend weapons.
5. Only one set of work material should be taken out at a time.

Playground Rules

1. Respect other students and school staff.
2. Wear shoes at all times.
3. No pretend weapons of any kind.
4. No violence or physical contact with other students.
5. No plastic toys
6. All language must be constructive.

7. Students should be aware of the environment they are playing in. Students are allowed in muddy areas if they are dressed appropriately.
8. Students may climb trees with a teacher's permission.
9. Rocks and sticks remain on the ground.
10. Fences stay intact and should not be touched.
11. One person on a swing at a time.
12. Sand stays in the sandbox.
13. Students should be careful and consider the consequences of their play.
14. If a student is getting out of control, a teacher or another student may ask him or her to reconsider their actions. Students are expected to treat the request with respect.

School and Classroom Procedures

School Newsletter

The school director or teacher will send an email to parents every two weeks containing information about the curriculum, special events, parent meetings, classroom news and more information on how to use the Montessori method at home. Parents are free to contact school staff if they have any suggestions for additions to the newsletter.

Fundraising

The Banyan Center will hold fundraising events both in Thailand and abroad throughout the year to help fund both scholarship students as well as any special events or additional educational opportunities. Parents will be informed of these fundraising efforts as they come up.

Volunteer Opportunities

Parents and other community members are welcomed to the school, and encouraged to volunteer at the Banyan Center. Those interested in either general volunteering or sharing a specific talent should contact the teacher or school director to discuss the most appropriate times. Sometimes school staff will elicit volunteers to assist at school functions, which will be highlighted in the bimonthly newsletter.

Daily Schedule

The following is the average daily schedule. Though we try to provide students with routine, sometimes we will adjust the schedule based on student activities. As a class we respond to student interests and focus.

8:45	Drop off time
9:00	Morning exercises
9:15	Morning meeting
9:30	Work period
11:30	Group activity
12:00	Lunch and outdoor play
1:00	Quiet rest period
1:30	Work period

3:30

Pick up

Food

Lunch Food

Lunch is provided for students every day. A health-conscious catering team prepares the lunch. There is only one option every day. Students are encouraged to try new foods and keep an open mind. Parents should inform the school staff if a child has any specific dietary requirements or allergies. This information is also to be specified on the enrollment forms.

If a child is extremely particular about their food, school staff may recommend that he or she brings his or her own lunch to school.

Lunch Policy

Lunchtime is intended to be a community-building event. Taking lunch is a form a 'practical life' experience. As such, students are asked to serve each other, take more control of their food by serving themselves seconds if they wish and if there is enough and clean their own plates. Students are able to leave the table as they finish, though they are encouraged to use lunchtime to socialize and engage in conversation with their peers and school staff. Sometimes school staff will use this time to discuss proper nutrition with students as we consider it to be a key component of a healthy and happy lifestyle. In order for students to make healthy choices, they must first be aware of how to respect their body and learn how the choices they make will affect their development and learning.

Birthdays

We understand that birthdays can be an exciting time in a person's life. The Banyan Center welcomes celebrations or birthday snacks provided by parents. We encourage healthy snacks such as muffins, popcorn, granola, fruit, etc.

Snacks

One of the key components of Montessori philosophy is freedom of choice and self-direction. Although we serve and eat lunch at a specific time, there is a snack area inside the classroom with bananas and water available all day.

School/Home Connection

Building a strong relationship with students' homes is an essential component of creating a supporting learning community. The exchange of information between school and home is vital to our shared responsibility for our students' development and welfare. We aim to keep parents and caregivers up-to-date with what goes on each day in order for parents to stay invested in their child's life away from home. We would love to further develop our communications with our students' homes and therefore welcome input and feedback. We strive to work together as a team, blurring the

school/home divide in order to build a sense of community and make daily student transitions seamless.

Open House

Before the start of the school year, the Banyan Center will host an Open House for students and their families so they can visit the school building, familiarize themselves with the surroundings and meet school staff and teachers.

Education

School staff will distribute Montessori Method information throughout the year to keep the entire learning community engaged. During the school year there will be opportunities for parents to visit the school and experience the Montessori technique firsthand. School staff will hold workshops of Montessori classroom set-up, materials and philosophy. Students will also be involved in teaching their families about the method and their experiences. School staff is always available to answer any specific questions families may have.

Classroom Observations

To increase the connection between school and home we encourage parents and family members to visit the school to observe their children and learn more about the daily routine. We ask that parents contact the teacher to first ensure that the student is normalized to the school environment prior to any observations.

Progress Reports

Twice a year, teachers will distribute formal progress reports to parents. These progress reports should be reviewed with by parents and students. Parents are encouraged to schedule conferences with teachers to discuss anything in further detail.

Caregiver/Teacher Conferences

Twice a year parents/caregivers are asked to confer with teachers about student progress and future development. These are generally held after the release of progress reports. Additional conferences may be scheduled at any time throughout the year.

Parent Feedback Group

Every year parents can have the opportunity of joining the feedback group. In a couple of meetings across the year the group discusses topics such as funding, services and development with a view to improving the work and success of the center for the entire school community.

Banyan Center Values in Action

If we expect students to espouse the values of a good, self-reliant and independent citizen committed to social justice and lifelong learning, we, as adults, must also model these values in our daily lives. The following are some specific actions we can take and be aware of:

- Clearly communicate your feelings, concerns and/or questions directly to the person involved.

- Engage students and other adults in open and constructive dialogue to think through problems and overcome disagreements
- Always greet students and other adults in a friendly way
- Use mealtimes as a time to socialize and engage in dialogue
- Ask questions for clarification
- Always clean an area after any activity or project
- Explain your choices and decisions
- Take responsibility for your actions
- Follow directions and rules. If you disagree or question them, explain why in a calm and clear manner.
- Try new things
- Attempt to accomplish tasks on your own, even if you are with others who can do them for you. Verbalize these occasions to children (Example: “I know that ____ can do this, but I am going to try to do it on my own first before asking for help.”)
- Use critical thinking and questioning vocabulary when speaking to children and other adults. Examples include
 - I am curious about...
 - I want to know more about...
 - Why do you think...?
 - I wonder...
 - Is that similar to...?
 - How is that different from...?

Student Behavior

The Banyan Center staff strives to teach students about positive behavior in a variety of ways. The following are just a few techniques used:

- Drama and role play
- Modeling good behavior
- Peer modeling
- Self and group reflection
- Dialogue
- Positive reinforcement of good behavior

The Banyan Center has created a list of disciplinary guidelines to ensure the safety and protect the rights of all students. The following described disciplinary actions that the teacher or school staff may employ in the event of any inappropriate conduct.

Inappropriate conduct may include:

- Defiance of school personnel authority
- Destruction of property
- Discrimination/harassment
- Disorderly conduct
- Fighting or threatening students or staff

- Lying
- Profanity
- Theft

Depending on the situation, teachers may respond with any of the following courses of action:

- Redirection
- Informal talk – talk with student, describe inappropriate behavior, parent may be notified
- Conference with student – formal meeting held with student to discuss behavior and develop a plan for change, parent may be notified
- Conference with parent – parent asked to attend conference with student and teacher to develop plan for change
- Time out – assign student to area of isolation to think about behavior
- Restriction of privileges – certain activities may be restricted, parent may be notified
- Suspension – in school or off campus suspension depending on availability of space in school and family situations, parent will be notified
- Coordination of dialogue between students – encourage dialogue and conflict resolution
- Implementation of a behavior contract- student and teacher together develop a behavior contract and list of consequences
- Remainder of day release to parents – parents are notified to pick up their child

Feedback

If parents or community members have any concerns, ideas or questions about any aspect of the Banyan Learning Center they are encouraged to call the School Director. School staff is always interested in hearing feedback and taking steps to improve.