

STANDARD 1. LEARNING STRUCTURE

For the sake of brevity, from now on we shall refer to 'Gándara International School' as simply 'Gándara'.

1. How does your school define 'Learning'? What should learners learn?

At Gándara we consider learning as a process that develops throughout the entire life of a person, being more pervading and intense during childhood. During that stage, we believe that learning should focus on the acquisition of knowledge and learning tools necessary for the children to become responsible, happy and self-reliant citizens that can contribute to a better society.

In Gándara learning happens through life experiences with concrete material (mainly Montessori), as well as through individual work and Socratic-style workshops where knowledge is facilitated rather than imposed by the adult.

There are certain aspects that are inextricably linked to our understanding of "learning" which are listed below.

An active and experiential process

In our view, learning should happen through active learning experiences in order to facilitate the development of as great a number of neurological connections as possible. Applying Montessori's concept of "sensorial learning", the school provides a wide range of experiences intended to make learning rich, interesting and meaningful to our students. Instead of following a textbook, the teachers gather a range of materials from various sources and are involved in an ongoing process of creation of learning resources.

Our definition of "active" learning revolves around the idea of learning as a student-centered process where students are not mere recipients of information, but pro-active, experimenting subjects that do not fear making mistakes and keep trying.

Furthermore, the learning environment has been designed to facilitate active learning experiences: open plan classrooms without the traditional individual desks allow the students to move naturally and freely, and to work comfortably in groups or individually if required. Space adapts to learning, and not vice versa.

Mistakes as a natural learning stage

Mistakes play an important role in Gándara's definition of learning. We understand that mistakes are inherent to the learning process and a constituent part of the scientific trial-error method. In this process, accompanying adults act as knowledge facilitators; they observe the students' process and try to avoid correcting mistakes when they consider that students will be able to find the answer by themselves.

Through Socratic dialogue and reflection, teachers guide students so they can elaborate their own conclusions. The teacher does not hold the expectation that the child will get to an irrefutable conclusion at an early stage, and thus, does not correct the children's inaccuracies or mistakes. Rather, the teacher observes and evaluates the process, and decides how to help the student arrive at a satisfactory conclusion by himself/herself. As a facilitator, the teacher provides the scaffolding necessary for the child to succeed.

Acquisition of critical thinking skills

As mentioned before, teachers use the Socratic method to stimulate critical thinking. Guiding students through a series of questions and answers, the teacher helps them draw out their own ideas and conclusions from their personal experiences and observations. This method fosters self-confidence and self-esteem and gives the students a sense of direction and satisfaction, having a direct effect on student motivation.

A holistic view of learning

The role of the school should go beyond the intellectual sphere and encompass the acquisition and development of values, as well as psycho-emotional and interpersonal skills. Thus, developing conflict-resolution skills, active listening, critical thinking, functional autonomy, and a solid sense of self-esteem and emotional security is paramount to the healthy development of individuals; to our mind, these aspects supersede the acquisition of academic knowledge. This holistic view of learning is one of the central principles of our philosophy.

Respecting individual learning rhythms

Another core principle of our learning philosophy is the idea that different students learn at different paces. This is especially crucial for children with special needs. We try to cater for the needs of functionally diverse students, who can follow their own learning paths without the stress of having to keep up with their peers. We achieve this by means of individual work and weekly tutor-student conferences where the tutors monitor the student's process, detect difficulties and adapt learning to each student.

Our definition of learning as well as all the core principles of our learning philosophy are laid out in the School Dossier, a document that is available to all the families that apply to the school. We expect to be able to have it published on our website throughout the current academic course – the website is currently under construction. The dossier is updated every year. The next update is scheduled for January 2019.

2. How did your school arrive at this definition? How frequently is it reviewed?

The fundamental idea of learning as an active experiential process has been at the core of the school project since its inception. The founders of Gándara (ADARE, S.L.) were joined in their vision of a school that allowed children to learn through action and enriching experiences, while enjoying the process.

We arrived at this definition through a process of study and reflection on the pedagogical work of Rebeca Wild, Huberto Maturana, John Holt, Jean Piaget and Maria Montessori, but also through the consideration of our own learning experiences as children and adults, and our work with students in educational contexts. A further source of inspiration has been and continues to be the work of Tinus Wijnakker, who comes to our school at least once a year for a counseling session with the staff.

Since the school opened its doors in 2014, the founding members have held long discussions and debates that have helped them arrive at this definition. The first two years were especially important in this process, as we observed the contrast between theory and expectations on the one hand, and the day-to-day practice at school on the other.

There is an ongoing revision of what learning involves which takes place at the Governing Board meetings. Based on the observation of the daily practice, the members of the Governing Board keep an open debate and a critical attitude when dealing with the main challenges faced by the school and reflecting on its methodological principles.

**3. To what extent does your definition of 'Learning' shape and drive:
- the curriculum chosen?**

At present, the school follows the Spanish curriculum mainly for practical reasons, as it is the curriculum our staff knows best and it can also be adapted to our active methodology. We consider the Spanish curriculum a good starting point to prepare our students for further studies, as it is rather comprehensive. Nonetheless, our goal is to gradually adjust our curriculum to include the US Core Standards for Math, English Language Arts, and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects, thus producing a blend of both systems. We expect this adjustment to take place along two years at least, as part of the staff is new and still has to hone their active methodology and conflict management skills.

Gándara's teachers adapt the Spanish curriculum to our methodology through a series of experiential activities in their weekly workshops. Additionally, for both individual and cooperative work, Montessori methodology helps considerably in areas such as Math, Natural and Social Sciences and Language Literacy.

- assessments practiced?

Our definition of learning has a fundamental impact on the way assessment is accomplished in Gándara. There is an ongoing evaluation process where the criteria applied are determined by the process of acquisition of the knowledge and learning tools both in the academic and psycho-emotional domains.

There are three evaluations based on the daily observation of each child. At the evaluations, the teachers make an objective description of the content areas worked on by the student and the skills and competences acquired.

Evaluation is done at two levels: the first one takes individual progress as a benchmark and monitors improvements within the student's own learning path; the second one evaluates student performance with regard to the objectives established by the curriculum for each grade.

- pedagogy/instructional methodology?

Our definition of learning moulds the school's methodology in every respect. Teachers try to approach the curriculum through experiential and interactive activities. As the methodology is also centered on the student, the teacher acts as a facilitator on the side lines. We see this dynamics in workshops, weekly parliaments and conflicts.

- recruitment of teachers?

The teaching staff is recruited on the basis of their expertise of and openness to active learning pedagogical models and project-based methodologies, as well as their specific training in these domains.

The professionals that work at Gándara share their passion for a holistic and flexible pedagogical model that is able to integrate up-to-date neuroscientific findings on how the brain works and, more specifically, how learning happens.

As a minimum requirement to be part of the teaching staff, teachers must complete two different types of training:

- a) Theory and practice of the Montessori Method from an active-school perspective.
- b) Training in emotional and respectful practices for school teachers, including active listening, non-violent communication and conflict management.

Last but not least, an important requirement is self-awareness and personal and emotional growth. After all, the teacher's most important tool is himself/herself. Teachers must be aware of how they relate to their environment and how their behavior influences that of their pupils before they can apply any methodology.

- learner admissions?

Admission to the school is made on the basis of the parents' interest in the Montessori and active methodologies, and their concern for raising their children in a way that is consistent with the basic needs of human beings and their individual rhythms. We also observe the parent-child relationship to make sure that the family is close to our philosophy and educational model.

The admission procedure involves a series of interviews with the parents and the child – two or three, depending on each case. During the interviews parents are explained all the relevant information about the school and required to answer a series of questions about the applicant child, themselves, and their expectations, interests and beliefs regarding learning and school life. The result of the interviews is conveyed to the Governing Board, which then decides on the admission.

In the cases where there is a glaring lack of alignment between the parents and the school, there are two possibilities: if considered that there is room for alignment, then the parents will be offered the chance of working jointly with the school throughout a first trial year. If, on the contrary, the Governing Board considers alignment to be impossible or very difficult to achieve, the student application will not be accepted.

4. Is there a written curriculum articulated vertically and horizontally?

As said before, the base curriculum for elementary and pre-school is the official Spanish curriculum. The teachers have already concluded a written adaptation of the Spanish curriculum for Natural and Social Sciences (*Cosmic Knowledge* in Montessori) for grades 1, 2 and 5 of elementary school. The curricular adaptation for grades 3, 4 and 6 is currently underway. We also expect to adapt the Spanish kindergarten curriculum to our methodology.