Curriculum Integration in early childhood education

What is it?
Curriculum integration (CI) in early childhood education can be described as project-based learning, where the project to be investigated is a current and ongoing interest for a group of children. Children are able to identify what they already know about the topic, and teachers can assess what children need to be able to pursue their interests and answer their questions, and ultimately each child will learn what they need to know.

Why we do it
The world around us is not normally divided up into curriculum segments. A trip to the supermarket is not just about what we need. We consider how busy the supermarket will be, the cost of the shop, perhaps the source of the product, how sustainably it was produced, integrating a number of different 'subject' areas into the experience (Social science, mathematics, environmental science).

Likewise for children, and with CI children are provided with opportunities to pursue in-depth knowledge of their interest developing their curiosity and their questioning skills. A two year old may be satisfied with knowing an insect is green (or brown, or black) and has 6 legs, while a four year old might want to know a lot more. CI enables different subject areas to be linked so that they are relevant and meaningful to children's lives.

How we do it
This may be best illustrated by an example. A group of children show an ongoing interest in insects. The children are able to identify what they already know; colours, basic anatomy, perhaps diet. They may have questions about where the insects live, what predators they have, or their life cycles. The teacher is able to prepare the learning environment so that the children can extend their learning with books, photographs, videos, or investigating the insects in nature. Through the learning process children could explore:

- Language and literacy in their reading and conversations
- Mathematical concepts as they discuss numbers of legs, sizes and shapes
- Visual art as they look at illustrations and create their own art works
- Science as they investigate life cycles, diet and predators
- Social science as they work collaboratively
- Environmental studies as they identify endangered insects and habitat destruction
- Technology if they choose to build an insect habitat

But all these areas would develop naturally based on the direction the learning took following the children's interests.

In this environment the role of teacher is to notice, recognize and respond to the children's interests and assist the children to explore their interests. The teacher's role is not to simply provide all the answers but to guide children to develop their own investigative skills and understandings. Learning is supported by the children's own natural curiosity in something that interests them.

"Te Whāriki holds the promise that all children will be empowered to learn with and alongside others by engaging in experiences that have meaning for them. This requires kaiako to actively respond to the strengths, interests, abilities and needs of each child" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p.13).