

The Montessori Method vs. Traditional School Programs

Role of the Teacher

In conventional classrooms the teacher takes the active role whereas the child takes the passive role; however, in a Montessori classroom this is not typical. Maria Montessori stressed the importance of children taking an active role in their learning. She did not design the classroom around the teacher, but rather around the learner. The children are able to move freely about the classroom, respectfully explore the prepared environment, and use the teacher as a guide. Williams (2000) found that children's choices reveal their needs and while "traditional students learn to be controllable, Montessori students learn to become interdependent and resourceful" (p. 218). In a traditional setting the teacher prepares a curriculum for the class as a whole. This often causes problems in the classroom as not all children are at the same developmental level nor are they ready for the same information.

Mixed Aged Classroom Promoting Social Development

Most traditional schools have one age group for each class. On the contrary, Montessori schools consist of children of various ages in the classroom. Montessori proposed that having a three-year span of age grouping allows the teacher, students, and parents to develop supportive, collaborative, trusting relationships, and help build a community. Research found that Montessori children "exhibited superior social skills and reported an unusually strong sense of community at their school" (Lillard, as cited in Bower, 2006, p. 212) compared to the non-Montessori students. The younger children are able to see where their education is headed; they see the older children with more challenging materials, and are eager to work up to the next step. Same age or same skill level grouping can often limit the development of a student.



Materials and Curriculum

Unlike other types of classrooms, Montessori's perfectly well-crafted materials allows for each child to work and learn at their own pace. The child's learning pace is internally determined rather than externally. This means the child determines when they are ready to move on, instead of the teacher. The materials were designed in an important, sequential order. The materials break activities into a series of organized steps and once a child has mastered one material they will move on to the next. The core curriculum of a Montessori classroom is separated into four main areas, Sensorial, Practical life, Language, and Mathematics. Along with these four areas, there are cultural sciences, and history. These areas help to develop the whole child, and set them apart from other children.



Self-Correction & Control of Error

Dr. Montessori designed her materials so that the children were able to complete the task at hand on their own and gain some self-sufficiency and independence. To accomplish this, Montessori put the discipline in the materials. There is self-correction in her materials, which means, the child can spot their own error through feedback from the materials. Errors are viewed as part of the learning process rather than mistakes. These self-correcting materials allow for the children to work on their own and learn from their own mistakes, without being shamed or embarrassed for making an error. “Having children find their own errors through the materials and work to master materials for their own sakes would be expected to lead to a mastery orientation in Montessori children” (Lillard, 2005, p. 278).

Order and Repetition



In Montessori classrooms, the materials are neatly stowed on shelves and are ready for the next child to use; this began to be put into practice when Montessori discovered the child’s sensitive period to order. The child may repeat any material as long as they want instead of completing a task and moving on without understanding. Research has proven Dr. Montessori’s theory about the importance of repetition for children – refining the child’s senses through the exercise of attention, comparison, and judgment. The children use the material until they have perfected it and internalized the feeling of success. Then the child is willing and ready to move on to something that is more challenging making them eager to succeed.

The Prepared Environment

The prepared environment, the classroom, is an important aspect of the Montessori way. Much different from other systems, Montessori was the first to fill her classrooms with child-sized furniture and materials. The artwork and classroom decorations are at eye level for the child not the adult. The classroom décor is simple and not too overwhelming, so the children are not distracted from their learning. There are individual child-sized tables and chairs, for when the child would like to work alone with no distractions and larger tables with many chairs so that children can work together or interact while they work independently. The materials are set out on shelves that are the perfect size for children to easily access.



Grace, Courtesy, & Conflict Resolution

Grace, courtesy, and conflict resolution are other important aspects that are integrated into the Montessori curriculum. Teachers set aside special group time, as a neutral moment, to teach the children the importance of manners and problem solving. This helps teach children appropriate social skills at a time when they can truly internalize the information. Typically an educator will try to teach these lessons when something has just happened, making it harder for the child to learn exactly what is being taught because of all the emotions they are feeling. Most schools leave teaching courtesy and grace to the parents, but research by Yarrow et. al, found teachers who deliberately teach and model nurturance and helpful behavior increase the likelihood that the students will “express sympathy, recognize others misfortune, and actively attempt to alleviate distress of another” (Simmons& Sands-Dudelczyk, 1983, p. 204).

Love of Learning Montessori’s main goal is to foster a love of learning in each and every classroom. Allowing children to take an active role in their own learning reinforces their excitement to learn. Getting their hands on the materials and working with each other helps to solidify their experiences and learning, as well as continue to foster their social development.

