

Guidelines to operate a Montessori school age 3-12

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The aims and objectives of a Montessori school are based on the anthropology, the pedagogy and the didactic views of Dr. Maria Montessori (1870- 1952). Although all teachers have their own outlook and opinions of our world, they find consensus in the main issues of the Montessori philosophy. The aims and objectives of a Montessori school are set down in a document to inform parents and local authorities. The issues and procedures of the school are acknowledged by the authorities and respected by the parents

The core of the Montessori pedagogy and the didactic approach is the *cosmic theory* and practice, the *notion that all non- living and living beings should be viewed in cohesion, each participating, inter-functioning within a system.* In the school curriculum will be described how these basic ideas are implemented in practice.

Montessori teachers are qualified to teach, not only by a state recognized general approved teaching certificate, but also by a Montessori diploma obtained after a Montessori course acknowledged by an international Montessori organization or by a local Montessori society.

Montessori believed and scientifically tried to prove that intrinsic, innate forces are directing the child in his physical and mental growth into adulthood and that child's development is the result of the interaction between inner potentials within the organism and the environment.

The first two years of a child's life are considered to be an additional (psychic) embryonic phase, during which he is helpless, unable to act independently or to display any conscious reflections. Typical for this extended embryonic period is the absence of a closed system of instincts that short-circuits an animal to his biotope. Therefore the human being is in principle free. Free to attach himself, as a dynamic link, to different cultures, wherever and whenever. Free to make choices and to exercise his will. Free to absorb the characteristics of his environment and to lay the fundamentals for his further life. Free to be in dialogue with his world but never be determined by it. From this moment on his impressions of the world, his interpretations and his reflections are the result of the combined activity of his senses, movements and his mind. The language of his environment gives him the tools to anchor his newly obtained concepts. Montessori considered the human being to be an individual, a personality that cannot be divided in separate parts to study.

Characteristic for this personality is the pursuit of independence, the mastering of autonomy. The ultimate aim of education is to help the child to become an autonomous personality

characterized by a self responsible self determination. Different functions, marked as integral aspects of the person to be, can be interpreted as developmental fields. Although each field is characterized by a specific developmental progression, each field can only be studied with the integral context in mind, since they are all related in the individual person. In the works of Montessori developmental fields are described and placed in a educational perspective. She distinguishes sensorial, motorial, volitional, cognitive, cultural, emotional, social, moral and creative domains. These fields support the decision making process of the personality.

By far the most important aim of education then should be: helping the child to do it himself.

Based on a deeply rooted trust in the child's potentials and the child's eagerness to learn, the Montessori teacher will render the necessary freedom to the child to experiment and discover facts and ways of ordering these facts by himself. Using developmental materials, the child will be able to discover ordering methods, such as classification, seriation, planning in bits of time, strategies to solve problems, flowcharts and algorithms.

Fulfilling his inner program of actions the child selects those environmental stimuli or incentives he needs. The intrinsic forces become manifest as a restless searching, as a longing for discoveries, as self-creativity, as a striving for independence and self-responsibility.

Montessori educators' main concern is to guarantee the child the freedom he needs for his explorations.

Movement is of vital importance to the child. Therefore spontaneous activity is encouraged in the Montessori school.

Learning by doing,- especially using his hands-, the child incorporates (incarnates) his findings. By means of language he is anchoring his experiences by naming them (concept building).His body language allows him to express himself, giving form to his thoughts, ideas and feelings.

The child will act spontaneously when he is free to do so. This means: free to choose learning tools, free to determine when, where, how long and with whom to work with the equipment.

There is however a clear restriction for all involved: the border line of freedom is the freedom of others. In other words: freedom, no licence! This way the child has to control himself, an inner self discipline is asked for. One is only free when freedoms horizons are discovered but also its limitations. This way freedom is both a condition for and a fruit of learning.

The teacher observes the child closely in order to approach the child properly with adequate educational means.

In a teacher's report the results of observation, reflection, evaluation, planning and follow up actions will be described.

Montessori speaks about sensitive periods. A sensitive period is a span of time during which a child is more able to absorb or to comprehend specific experiences within an environment than ever before or after the time has passed. These periods are critical in the sense that without adequate environmental matching incentives the child will be hampered in his harmonious development. The educator should enable the child to find in his environment matching keys which the child needs for his individual development.

Monitoring the child's progress in learning, the teacher may focus on two ways of systematic observation: assessment and evaluation of the results of learning, and assessment and evaluation of the process of learning. Evaluation the results may be done by comparing the outcomes with fixed critical standards or to focus on the individual progression of the child in the framework of his own development. An other way of evaluation might be to find out more about the depth and the flexibility of the child's learning: the way the child demonstrates his ability to apply the just learned matter in a new learning context. During the process of learning the teacher will observe the depth of attention of the child in action (polarization of attention), the frequency of the child's actions, the level of his inner self discipline and the amount of social encounters with peers. In doing so, the teacher may decide to introduce the next material, or to skip this step and move into an other more favourable direction. On the other hand the teacher might decide to let the child repeat the ongoing actions. By doing this, the child will strengthen his self confidence, mastering the ordering strategy of the material. In case the child has problems to grasp the meaning of used material, the teacher may introduce materials on the same level, with an alternative approach, to come to the understanding that is asked for.

A Montessori class consist of three groups according to age. In a Montessori school one will find a 3-6 group, a 6-9 group and a 9-12 group.

Since mental age does not coincide with calender age, it is understood that this way of heterogeneous grouping means that children will be acting in an organized environment for a period of three years on their own level according to their readiness and pace.

All children enter the class as newcomers, than will form a middle group and eventually become the older group.

Newcomers entering an existing group will be provided with a clear and meaningful exhibit of social and intellectual behaviour in the sense that they can easily adapt to the new situation as a result of their inner striving for new experiences in the nearest zone of their development. In other words: they get the idea what to go for.

This constellation makes it possible for the children to work together and helping each other.

The teacher is not forced to have a rather large amount of the same learning devices, one for each child to be used at the same time. In this context the older children may become the informal leaders of the group and experience the aspects of that role.

Montessori teachers prepare an environment geared to the needs of each individual child.

Montessorians use the term 'prepared environment'. This environment can be defined as a unit of a systematically organized set of learning materials which will function as keys to open -and to order the world around. The Montessori classroom is adjusted to the child's proportions and strength. There is ample room, preferably in the centre of the room, to spread rugs on the floor to work on.. Some materials ask for a large area to work with.

The identity of Montessori materials can be seen as the totality of its characteristics: a built in control of error, the scientific aspects, the key function, the isolation of the quality, the internal limitations of quantity, and the position in a network of materials. A Montessori teacher has a thorough knowledge of the subject matter to be introduced and the proper use of (Montessori) developmental materials and their instructional techniques.

Montessori teachers know how to create a Montessori prepared environment for the age levels 3-6, 6-9 and 9-12.

In the Montessori 3-6 group one will find materials for practical life exercises, by means of which the child will not only practise and control his larger and finer muscles, but also make him aware of planning and organization in space and time. In the 6-9 group practical life exercises become a vital part in learning to share responsibility for (the care of) the environment.

By means of sensorial materials the child will be able to discover basic ways of ordering (classification; seriation) his impressions, orderings that are considered to be prerequisite before the child will be able to use the advanced materials for reading, writing, arithmetic, science and social studies. In order to detect classification, seriation, rules (rule learning), or the complexity of algorithms and problem solving, the child should use the equipment properly, that

is in a specific way, in which the variables are controlled. The child, therefore, should not only stick to the facts but also control the proceedings. This asks for a special attitude: the attitude of a young explorer, the scientist to be.

The Montessori teacher is able to determine what the child needs and to guide the child into the nearest zone of his development.

Arranging and introducing educational means (Montessori materials and other teaching aids suited to the situation) asks for anticipation on educational events to come. In Montessori's own words on the role of the teacher: 'We must aim at awakening in the child the dormant mind of the man.' Still another way to state it is: aiming at the optimal incongruity. incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs

Arranging for educational materials and activities also means anticipation on events that cannot be predicted, but that occur spontaneously to the surprise of everybody involved. So flexibility is asked for. We may consider it to be a basic condition.

Formulating rules for social communication implies securing the rights and duties of each member of the group (including the teaching staff).

It means a shift from personal to environmental authority. Controlling the group setting in the Montessori school means creating a guarantee for an optimal social and intellectual encounter among the members of the group.

A well-trained and well-experienced Montessori teacher knows several techniques to handle the time factor and efficiency dealing with the group.

The teacher will see to it that each child will have a new lesson or get the necessary help or attention in time.

On the other hand it is impossible for the teacher to help the children too often, which will motivate children to help each other, to once more try to solve upcoming or given problems on their own. Children learn this way to look for adequate solutions, e.g. to do some other work

in the meantime.

Sometimes a teacher may give a group lesson to children in a common field of interest or at the same level of an aspect of learning. A teacher may work with the group as a whole introducing an interesting piece of subject matter. In this case the lesson will be short and aims at a wide range of self organized actions by the children at different levels.

Sometimes a teacher may decide to work with a class as a whole, e.g..to read a story, to talk about a topic, to sing together or to perform gym lessons. Several classes may work together at a project or meet each other to organize an exhibition.