

Mrs. Irre's Class Notes

Lesson I: The Prepared Environment

If you were to visit ten different primary Montessori classrooms across many lands, what you would find in each would be similar (provided you looked at authentic Montessori schools such as MLMS). One of the most satisfying things I do each year is prepare the classroom. Following, I list some of the standard preparations.

Primary Montessori classrooms have these four areas developed: Practical Life, Sensorial, Language, and Math. Typically these areas are set up in different quadrants of the room, and the materials in each quadrant and on each shelf flow in development from simple to complex. As I describe each curriculum area in future correspondence, you will learn more about the complexities of the didactic materials.

The prepared environment typically has low shelves so children of all ages can reach things. Each lesson is complete in that it has its own space on the shelf where it can always be found unless a child is working with it. The tools used for lessons are all child-sized and real (no plastic scissors, for instance). The materials are typically color coded and beautiful. The materials will consistently be returned to that same spot after children use them and the adults make sure the classroom is restored and refreshed each day. As a participant in the classroom one's eye will always be caught if something is put back in the wrong place or the materials are not built in the correct order. The older children have such a hard time when little ones are just learning the gradation of the pink tower and broad stair - if it is out of order they feel compelled to fix it! For children in the sensitive period for order, there is nothing more comforting than a prepared environment. Those of you rolling your eyes at the idea that young children have a sense of order, note we are not talking about their playroom or bedroom - I know as a former parent of young children that they can be quite messy. The sense of order, however, is ever present in small children. Think about the times you are trying to rush your child out the door, or attempt to skip a part of a favorite story to speed up bedtime. It doesn't work well, does it?

A simple definition of Montessori's Sense of Order:

Montessori tells us that the **sensitive period for order begins at birth, peaks during early toddlerhood, and generally lasts until around age five**. Characterized by an inner need for consistency and repetition, the child in this sensitive period craves routines and predictability.

Each lesson in our prepared environment is set up so all parts are intact and ready for action. As a first example I will use flower arranging. On the flower arranging tray there is a funnel, a small pitcher for water, scissors to cut stems, a paper for discarded leaves or stems, and a drying cloth. There is a grouping of vases and doilies to choose from and, of course, a selection of cut flowers. Children are given a presentation by me and are then free to explore the materials, work with the lesson as long as they are happy to do so, and as often as they would like (provided it is available on the shelf). Once completed they adorn their classroom with their creations. The prepared environment allows for one child to work with a material at a time.

Through grace and courtesy lessons and living the classroom life each day, children learn that only one child will work with a material at a time. This is one of the most commented upon observations that most adults have when they watch our class. There are very few to no struggles over materials in the classroom. That, and the idea that children of all ages are able to wait for adult attention in the classroom. In modern times adults tend to be unaware that children are able to wait and be patient in the right circumstances, provided they have the proper training and follow through. (One of the topics discussed in *Soul of Discipline*.)

When children clean up flower arranging materials they are always able to access the drying rack if their drying cloth got wet from a spill. They know where to find a trash can for discarding the paper holding the leaves and stems to discard. They know the floor bucket is under the aquarium when the spills are a little

more significant and need special attention. (A scenario just came to my mind that when showing a three-year-old child a lesson with table washing materials, a newly-turned five year old literally followed us with the floor bucket convinced that the opportunity would arise for some helpful mopping up. We did not disappoint. . .) As part of preparing for the children to work in the classroom the adult must think through each and every activity to be sure there is access to needed things and replenishing materials for them to get the work "ready for the next person," when they are finished.

As a second example I will use a math lesson called the stamp game. The stamp game is a material children use in both the latter parts of primary class into the elementary class. It consists of a tray with four cups. One cup holds a collection of stamps (tiles in modern time) that have 1000 printed on them, one cup with 100 printed on tiles , one cup with 10 printed on tiles, and one with 1 printed on tiles to represent thousands (green), hundreds (red), tens (blue) and units (green). The tray contains a pencil holder with a writing pencil, a red pencil, and two colored pencils. Close by is a container holding paper for the adults to write equations for children to solve. When children bring this tray to a work table, everything is there for them to perform addition, multiplication, subtraction and perhaps even division equations. It sounds very complicated for young children, but once you see the progression of how the five and six year olds get to that point, it won't seem as unbelievable. (That is a hook for when I get to the mathematics part of the curriculum.)

In another day and time we encouraged all parents to come and observe our classroom. We look forward to the day when that is again a practice. For now you will have to rely on our communication and correspondence to educate yourself. If you are intrigued by the idea of the prepared environment, type it into your search bar. Montessori education is very popular and it is easy to read about each topic further after I whet your appetite. Please also note that I encourage you to utilize me as a resource - I love to talk about children and the Montessori environment. Conferences are scheduled for February 21st but don't feel like you need to wait until then.

To finish up, The Montessori Triad, as it is described, includes the prepared environment, the children, and the guides. We form the perfect triangle for your children's learning and development.

Lesson II: Practical Life

Think about your home. Think about the myriad tasks that are required for its upkeep and hominess. We aren't much different in the Montessori classroom.

The first Montessori environment was opened on January 6, 1907, in San Lorenzo, Rome, Italy, by Maria Montessori. Through Montessori's observations and work with the children, she discovered their astonishing, almost effortless ability to learn. She was born August 31, 1870, and died May 6, 1952. Her classrooms are called Casa dei bambini, translated as "The Children's house."

In your child's Children's House the upkeep of the prepared environment is similar to the upkeep of any home. We have tables to wash, objects to polish, shelves to dust, laundry to fold, floors to sweep. . .

The practical life lessons are a series of lessons presented to all students in the Montessori primary class focusing on the care of the person and the care of the environment. They also include all forms of art. Your child's development strengthens with the practice of these tasks. Their ability to concentrate lengthens, their hands learn to work together and become more coordinated with the

use of tools meant specifically for the size of their hands, and their ability to make choices and set goals for themselves comes from the independent choice to participate in these lessons of practical life, along with the other materials in the classroom.

When your child decides to wash a table, for instance, (s)he first makes a commitment to purposeful work. This is called task initiation if one is thinking about the executive functions we hope our children are developing. This in itself is a wonderful thing. The children not only contribute to their community, they also make a decision to focus their energy in a positive way. There is also a lot of organization that takes place in order to take on this task. When the child begins, they take a basin and a bucket from the shelf. Inside the bucket is a pitcher with an apron folded and tucked inside. There is also a floor mat alongside and a drying cloth draped over the side. In the basin they find a sponge, a soapdish, and a scrub brush. This, along with water, is everything they need to complete their task. When presented, the materials are laid out in the order of their use to assist the child to order the task. The first step the teacher shows, once materials are ordered, is to fetch water at the sink. The child assists by carrying the pitcher to and fro. For some, carrying a pitcher full of water is quite tricky, but don't worry, there is always a floor bucket available under the aquarium in the prepared environment to clean up any spills. Once back at the table the teacher pours the water, wets the sponge (with a big point of interest how to squeeze the sponge until it is damp, not dripping) and wets the table. The scrub brush is then picked up, dipped in the water (again paying big attention to the fact that the brush gets shaken off before applying soap). The table is scrubbed, typically with circular motions and from left to right and top to bottom. Once the scrubbing is finished the table is rinsed, then dried. The clean-up process is as important as the scrubbing. All of the steps are presented including hanging up the drying cloth and getting the basin and bucket "ready for the next person" by putting a fresh drying cloth in and leaving it just as it was found.

Once the practical life presentations are given, the children are free to work with the materials any time they are available. Children enjoy practical life work from the time they enter the primary environment until they graduate in kindergarten. (Ms. Irwin has been bringing in some beautiful brass pieces from her father's collection. The older children have been having quite a happy time seeing how shiny they are getting!)

Table scrubbing and polishing are examples of how one can care for the environment. Other presentations to care for the environment include, but are not limited to, using a broom and a sweeping guide. The sweeping guide gives children a target of where to sweep the debris, otherwise children will often sweep debris from one end of the room to another and back again! Washing chalkboards and using an old fashioned washing board to clean polish cloths are also favorites. A dusting basket allows children to dust a shelf, or some materials in class. There is never a shortage of dust!

Lessons of practical life to care for the person include, most importantly, the dressing frames. Children have the opportunity to practice movements of buttoning, snapping, buckling, zipping, tying, and lacing with the dressing frames. Each frame has five opportunities for practice and can be done at calm moments. It is tricky to learn these movements at transition times. We all know how hectic they can be. Shoe polish is also a lovely care-of-person activity. I must say, Ms. Irwin and I are well taken care of. Most children do not wear leather shoes these days so the children often will polish ours!

Practical life is a large part of what makes a Montessori class so appealing. The children form a community with all helping to do their part. Countless times in the past weeks I have witnessed a child's look of glee after polishing my shoes for me, folding the laundry I brought in, or, the best yet, rolling the big braided rug to sweep under it (a magnanimous task for the children!).

Carrie

Lesson III: Sensorial

The Sensorial curriculum includes materials and activities designed to provide children with opportunities to experience the visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile senses while learning. The Montessori classroom is the only place you will find these sensorial materials that give the children a unique experience to learn through all the senses.

Dr. Montessori wrote, "Our senses are the tools for the perception of our surroundings. The environment reaches the individual through the use of the senses." The senses receive information, the brain interprets this sensorial information, and then the nerves transmit energy to the muscles that control movement. Through movement, information and learning are refined.

With a wide array of Montessori manipulative materials, children develop visual perception and discriminate color (red/blue), form (circle/square), dimension (long/short), and tactile perceptions (rough/smooth, hot/cold, and light/heavy). As children become more sensitive to impressions from their environment, they are able to distinguish, categorize, and relate new information to what they already know.

One of the most famous of the primary Montessori materials is the pink tower. In the photos included is a three-year-old girl building the tower. At this stage the perceptions are being formed and the language of large and small is being introduced and interpreted through movement... actually holding and manipulating large and small. This particular material is used throughout each and every day. The youngest children build it. As they grow they may compare it to the bases of a material called the broad stair. They sometimes match it to pictures that correspond to the bases of the squares. The sizes correspond to the math cubes that show accurate depictions of each number one through ten cubed - we may compare those sizes when children count long number chains. Children draw the pink tower. They trace the bases on pink paper and make a pink tower collage. We have even made mobiles out of the pink tower. As you see, there are a multitude of things to do with this material that "reach the individual through the use of the senses."

The picture of the pink tower that is no longer pink is something only the oldest of the children would experiment with, typically with some suggestions from an adult. This lesson started by me saying, "hmmm, I wonder if you could find a pink tower cube that is the same size as the binomial cube when you build the binomial cube outside of the box?" And he did. With interest still being shown I said, "hmmm, I wonder if you could find a pink tower cube that is the same size as the trinomial cube when you build the trinomial cube outside of the box?" And he did. With umpteen more "I wonders" we looked at all the corresponding cubes, and built and rebuilt the binomial and trinomial cubes on top of, next too, and finally with all the substitutions we could make. Children think it's so funny to put the pink tower cubes inside of the boxes for the binomial and trinomial cubes. This incredibly fun and challenging work was something this child concentrated on for a long period of time and had many onlookers seeing the results and making their own predictions.

In the picture with the yellow and blue towers being built on the chowkie (floor table) is a set of materials called the knobless cylinders. This material has four boxes of ten cylinders each in red, green, yellow, and blue that all differ according to height and diameter. They can all be graded according to these attributes. They can be built on top of each other, matching the same diameters. They can be made into towers by gradation, although in the picture the child is attempting to build the blue set which has differing heights and the same diameter for each cylinder. This is a tricky tower to build even for me!! Oftentimes you will see four children hunkered around a chowkie table each with one of the four boxes, playing a game. The first child starts the game and sets out any cylinder from their box. The next in turn matches either the height or the diameter of that cylinder and replaces the existing cylinder with theirs and keeps the original. The play keeps going with children taking turns and capturing cylinders that are either the same height or the same diameter

as one of theirs. The children love playing the game and "distinguish, categorize, and relate new information to what they already know."

The picture of the boy walking amongst the red maze is utilizing a material called the red rods. The red rods are used by younger children to learn to grade according to length. The material spans from a ten-centimeter rod to a hundred centimeter rod. The control of movement necessary to work with this material must be present. Children are shown how to move about the classroom carrying the short and long rods. As you can imagine learning the language of long and short is part of this material's appeal. Once the children work with this materials it isn't long before they count number rods. Number rods look very similar except for the fact that the colors alternate every ten centimeters to depict the quantity of one to ten. The number rods are the first lesson in the Montessorio math materials. It should be noted that many, many of the sensorial materials coordinate with the math materials and give early sensory information for mathematical concepts. In the picture I included, the boy has learned to arrange these rods into a maze that he can then walk through, turn, and walk out of. The goal is to refrain from touching any rods on the walking journey. The control of movement is fantastic as children achieve this goal.

The last picture is of a child building the trinomial cube. The skills required for mastering this material include, but are not limited to, control of movement, visual perception of dimension and color, and a lot of focus. There are twenty-seven cubes and prisms that fit into a large cube. Children learn to build it inside the box, outside of the box, and sometimes while wearing a blindfold!! It is a particularly satisfying activity putting all twenty-seven cubes into the box without utilizing the sense of sight. I love showing children how to build the trinomial cube with a blindfold even after having done it what seems like a hundred times! Note that in the future in the elementary classroom the children learn the trinomial equation utilizing the cubes and prisms of the trinomial cube. I remember the day well when my then fifth-grade daughter visited my class to show me the written form of the trinomial equation. I knew then what I always suspected: The Montessori materials are genius!!

It was hard to pare down which sensorial materials to highlight in this correspondence about sensorial materials - they are all noteworthy choices. I simply took the five most-recent pictures from my phone and used those!!

I hope you are enjoying getting to know a little more about the materials in the classroom. They are truly fascinating. Montessori is the most wonderful way to teach and learn.

Carrie

Lesson IV: Language

All students participate in language lessons no matter their age or when they started in the Montessori primary class.

The moment your child set foot in class they began working in small groups focusing on varied language cards. Language cards are plentiful in class and change with interests, focuses, and seasons. The children's vocabularies are continually expanding with conversations being plentiful at school. We read fiction and nonfiction, which contributes to expanding knowledge and vocabulary. Ms. Irwin spends a lot of time gathering small groups. During group work, participants may look at the parts of a turtle, perhaps name geometry shapes, or classify cards into categories. The most famous classification cards in the classroom are living vs. nonliving, plant vs. animal, vertebrate vs. invertebrate, and finally the five classes of vertebrates. The children adore these small group lessons and the conversations are plentiful. The most important thing I can tell you about language cards is they are plentiful and can change on a whim if a particular interest arises. That is one of the many things that sets the Montessori approach apart from most curriculums. First of all, the materials are constantly available if a spontaneous conversation occurs. Secondly, materials can be added or taken away as interests come and go.

One of my favorite stories of this past week stems from a conversation after drawing time when someone talked about the word merry, as in happy. A child commented that they would marry someone when they got older. It spurred me to point out the difference between these two words and also the name Mary. I asked one of our kindergarteners to come to me once we cleaned up and we got out homophone cards from the language shelf. The amusing thing is I made the cards during my Montessori training upteen years ago and have never used them. How many kindergarteners do you think can read well enough to read new, knew, and gnu? Well, only one that I have known so far, and it just happened this past week. I was shocked when we encountered the word gnu and she knew what it was - even out of context! As it turns out she has a book in her home collection titled Nelly Gnu. Who knew?? That is truly one of the delights of the Montessori language curriculum. We teachers plan diligently to show children sequential lessons toward a goal. But if the opportunity arises it is so easy to run with it and take advantage of the learning opportunity.

Sound games, also done in small groups, assist your child to learn phonemic awareness: how a word begins, how a word ends, what sound is in the middle, what sound comes next? The children love picking out their favorite little objects and playing sound games. In our classroom we have a large display of little toy objects. You would be surprised how responsible the children have become with the objects, knowing they are reserved for language lessons. (If you had a few come home in a pocket, that is part of the process of "learning" the objects are reserved for language lessons. It is a great opportunity for the children to practice inhibition control and/or accountability!!) Sound games don't end there. We may pair objects with sandpaper letters as an extension. Then everyone gets to hear the sound and trace the letter. We may play little games to break a word into its component sounds. We may use visuals to help children determine that the word has separate sounds. Yesterday I played a game with a few kids that we sorted pictures by their vowel sound, listening carefully if it had an /a/ in the middle or an /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/. Each child's experience gets tailored to his/her needs. Learning to read is different for everyone. In the Montessori world it is not a one-size-fits-all approach.

Even the youngest of children trace sandpaper letters. The sandpaper letters provide visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile experiences each time they are traced. That is a lot of senses involved in each tracing of each letter. We typically begin with the sound of their first name and trace that particular letter (unless it is a vowel combination or a phonogram). If not their name then perhaps we would start with mmmmm for mommy. Children trace the letters in groupings of three and then play a little game to identify the letter. There are all kinds of ways we encourage children to trace the letters at any time they are willing or interested. The motor memory of the letter is what leads to cursive writing, and the sound name is what leads them to work with the movable alphabet.

Once children know many letter sounds, the movable alphabet is introduced. The movable alphabet is a large box containing compartments with many of each letter sound. With guidance the children combine the skills of phonemic awareness and recognition of letters to construct words. You'll notice the spelling is phonemic in nature. It is often through the movable alphabet that children discover they can read what they have written!

Parents always ask what can I do to help my child learn to read. I will take just a few lines to talk about reading to your children. From my research, especially from a book titled *The Read Aloud Handbook*, by Jim Trelease, it is stated that reading to your children and modeling reading of all kinds in their presence (cookbooks, maps, newspapers, magazines, directions for new purchases, novels, spiritual reading, news articles, etc.) are two of the best things you can do to ensure your child becomes a reader. In our household reading before bed was the perfect time to read aloud to our children, but you'll have to find what works best for your household. The older your child

grows, the harder it is to find distraction-free quality time, so setting a routine now of reading each day/night is a wonderful way to strengthen your bond and give your family something to be excited about together. Exposing your child to language is proven to help expand their vocabulary. Depending on your child's age, reading materials may differ. I love to talk about books and have many suggestions regarding favorites. There are many sources for finding good literature, but the most obvious is the children's librarian at Samuel's Public Library. The SPL is one of the best! If I were to offer a note of caution, much of what is marketed these days in book form is a continuation of screen time characters. I highly recommend you choose different forms of good, rich literature that are time tested.

Side note: In the *Soul of Discipline*, by Kim John Payne the author has a segment (page 87-88) that is quite worth reading. The segment is titled *The Troublesome Truth About Screen-Distracted Parenting*. If you are anything like most of us, much of your reading occurs on your phone. Many of the things I listed above such as cookbooks, maps, newspapers, magazines, directions for new purchases, novels, spiritual reading, news articles, are all accessible from that handy device called our phones (or computer, or pad, or kindle). Some food for thought. . . our children are not seeing us read different sources these days. They are, however, seeing us distracted by the ever-present distractions of technology or seeing us engrossed in staring at it while reading - no page turning or anything! This is definitely something we want to all be conscious about. The author states: Kids pay attention to our actions much more than they do to what we say.

That leads me to the book study I offered. Now that we are able to meet, if you are interested, please contact me and we can make a simple plan. I can assign chapters to read and we can get a small group together to process and question what we read. Finding a compatible time is always the trickiest part of any offer like this, but after school one day a week for a few weeks would be the most logical.

Have a good weekend!

Carrie

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