

EDUCATION FOR LIFE

Montessori Education In Queensland



An introduction to :
Montessori Based Classrooms

Grovely State School

DR MARIA MONTESSORI

Dr Maria Montessori (1870-1952) was the first woman to be granted a medical degree from an Italian university. Maria Montessori used her training in clinical and scientific observation to pursue her passion – the development of the child. She was acclaimed worldwide for her work and recognised as a most important pioneer in the methods of early childhood education. She went on to expand her ideas into a fully articulated program for children from 3 to 12 years of age.

MONTESSORI APPROACH

The Montessori approach to education is concerned with the development of the potential of the whole child, ie the social, emotional, physical, aesthetic and intellectual development. The Montessori method of education is based on ‘hands on’ learning that is individually programmed to recognise and respond to the particular developmental needs of each child. Montessori believed strongly in the innate capacity of children to do their own learning. She recognised that learning is stimulated by an inner need and carries for the child its own motivations and rewards. Montessori’s approach is reflected more in the development of qualities such as independence and self-confidence, and skills such as concentration and orderly work habits, rather than in the mastery of subject areas especially in the early years.

THE PREPARED ENVIRONMENT

The prepared environment is physically and psychologically designed to meet the needs of the child. The room is scaled to the children’s age allowing them independence of movement and the ability to be masters of their own environment. Within the prepared environment, the freedom to move, practise skills and work with others (within a framework of appropriate social behaviour), children are able to develop self-esteem and self-discipline.

From her observations of what children did, Montessori developed the notion of a “right time to learn”. She stated that there are periods of heightened sensitivity in children’s lives when they show strong spontaneous interest in certain aspects of the environment. These “sensitive periods” help to establish and refine such human characteristics as language, movement and sensory awareness. That is, children’s intellectual development is on a continuum just as is their physical development. Montessori, therefore, designated a non-competitive environment for children in which they would have the potential to be free to engage in those activities that she observed were characteristic for their age group. “Didactic materials”, the other children and adults as well, form the fabric of the Montessori classroom and contribute to the learning environment of each child.

THE MATERIALS

The Montessori classroom aims to provide children with specially designed materials and resources that are suited to their needs at each stage of development. Montessori believed that children learn best by being taught concepts in a concrete form; that they need to touch and manipulate objects and not just hear information. Although this is particularly so in the early years of learning, in a Montessori school many concepts across the curriculum, and especially in the area of mathematics, are introduced in a concrete way even after children have made the transition into thinking abstractly at about the age of nine.

In their design and use, the materials provide opportunity for the child to work on tasks for extended lengths of time thus supporting the development of concentration. The materials are designed to attract the child and to stimulate activity. They encourage the child to follow a sequence of difficulty thus providing continuing challenge. Significant features of the early materials are that they isolate a quality and allow for the possibility of handling, repetition, exactness, correlation and the acquisition of precise vocabulary. Most importantly, the early equipment is self-correcting and, as the child manipulates the materials, the “control of error” helps children gauge their performance. This methodology promotes a love of learning that, hopefully will stay with the children throughout their time in a Montessori school and beyond.

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

The function of the teacher is defined in wider terms than merely an imparter of knowledge. Rather, the teacher is a director and facilitator of development. Children are given access to resources, equipment and experiences that are pertinent to their individual needs at any given time. This necessitates close observation of each child's needs by the teacher, careful programming and recording of individual progress. In academic areas of the program this means lessons being given on a one to one basis or in very small groups of children who are at the same point of readiness. In order to maximise the child's chances of success, their readiness, maturation, understanding and interest level will be taken into account before they are introduced to something new.

SOCIAL INTERACTION

In a Montessori classroom there is a special atmosphere of cheerful orderliness, calmness and purposeful work. Not only a place for individual learning but a vibrant community of children where the child learns to interact socially in many ways. It is an environment that maintains a balance between the needs of each individual to have sufficient freedom to grow and to develop towards independence, and the necessity for order and harmony within the group. The vertical age structure which typifies a Montessori school further supports the growing child's social learning. The older children will teach the younger children and learn much themselves; while the younger ones are inspired to further activities through observing the older ones. With such varied levels of development within the classroom, children can work at their own pace unhindered by competition and encouraged by cooperation.

PRE-PRIMARY 3 to 6 YEARS

Montessori realised that children between the ages of birth and six years have a special kind of mind. They learn to walk and create coordinated movement; they learn a language; they come to understand and take on the behaviours and customs of the group into which they are born while, at the same time, they are creating their intelligence. She called this special kind of mind "the absorbent mind" because it allows children to learn easily even though conscious will and memory are not yet fully developed. The young child's need for order, movement, social interaction, sensory, motor and language experiences in the pre-primary years are used as a guide for the conceptual framework of the Montessori classroom. There are four main areas in the pre-primary program:

*Practical Life *Sensorial *Language *Mathematics

Cultural studies, science, history, etc are offered as extensions of the language program.

PRIMARY

Primary children typically can be characterised by their questioning minds, their ability to abstract and imagine, their moral and social orientation, and their unlimited energy for research and exploration. Primary is a great period of expansion and growth. Having acquired a sound knowledge of the basics in pre-primary, children are now ready and willing to acquire culture and to discover the world and their place in it. The children will be exposed to a wide range of studies during this time. Many preschool materials will be looked at again but now they become known as geometry, geography, grammar and algebra. Primary children look for larger meanings, correspondences and classifications and they seek to attain order and synthesis in the mental environment.

INTEGRATED CURRICULUM

Cosmic education provides an overview for all studies in the Montessori Primary environment. Cosmic education begins with the story of the universe through which we see the interrelationship of all things. When the story of the universe is presented it establishes an overview, a set of first principles that provide the context for the details. Studies are integrated and related to the whole. Different subjects covered include mathematics, geometry, language, history, geography, biology, botany and science. Art, craft, drama, music, a second language, fitness and sporting skills are incorporated in the program along with computer technology. Excursions are organised to complement the curriculum. "Going out" and "exploring" are integral to the Primary program.

TRANSITION

Experience shows that Montessori trained children cope very well in other schools and are able to make the transition both academically and emotionally. This is not a random outcome but something they have been prepared for. Montessori aims to develop children who are independent, responsible, well organised, self-motivated and adaptable and, with a positive attitude to school, study and adults, they are well prepared to go on to secondary schooling. Montessori schools endeavour to liaise with the schools to which their students will progress to ensure that academic expectations are compatible.

PARENTS ROLE

As a parent you are the most important influence in your child's life. Nobody loves and cares for your child the way you do. The Montessori school provides a natural extension of your home and seeks to achieve a unique collaboration between parent, child and educators. The Montessori program also offers parents creative principles and philosophy and a new understanding of their children that can be incorporated within the home environment. As a parent you can expect to contribute and be part of a vibrant school community.

MONTESSORI IN AUSTRALIA

Montessori education is offered in many countries throughout the world. It came to Australia in the early 1900s. Martha Simpson, who was later to become the first inspector of schools, established the first Montessori classroom at the Blackfriars School in Sydney in 1912. The growth of Montessori since the early 1970s has been phenomenal, and it continues to increase. In 1975 there were perhaps 15 Montessori classrooms throughout Australia; today there are in excess of 150. Programs are offered at the pre-primary, primary and now secondary level and children with special needs are also catered for within an integrated environment. Montessori also looks at the needs of the 0-3 year old children with toddler groups being established and support and education for parents also being offered. Montessori is an important group within the community – public and parent education is enhanced through seminars, lectures and publications, and submissions are prepared on key issues concerning the child. Montessori speaks out to draw attention to and further the rights of the child.

Further reading / Links:

Dr Maria Montessori	<i>The Absorbent Mind; From Childhood to Adolescence; The Secret of Childhood; To Educate the Human Potential</i>
E M Standing	<i>Montessori; Her Life and Work</i>
E Hainstock	<i>Teaching Montessori in the Home; The Essential Montessori</i>
A Wolf	<i>Look at the Child</i>
T Molloy	<i>Montessori and Your Child</i>
P P Lillar	<i>Montessori – A Modern Approach</i>

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