



PUTTING THE MONTESSORI METHOD INTO PRACTICE



Introduction

The Montessori method is a combination of theory and practice. It is about the ideas, principles, techniques, and materials that inspire, inform, and guide all Montessori programs in practice — when the teacher interacts with children. This last section presents ideas and concrete suggestions about how the teacher can put Montessori theory into practice in an elementary program. The topics are as follows:

- the designed environment
- presentations and activities
- the start of the school year
- the typical day
- the role of the teacher

The Designed Environment

Introduction

The designed environment is one of the main educators of the students. It is designed to welcome the students, encourage them to interact with the people and objects in the environment, and help them to develop physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially. The designed environment also provides opportunities for self-correction. The students learn from their own mistakes and improve their judgment while doing the activities that interest them the most.

This section focuses on four aspects of designing the environment: classroom set-up, use of all available space, materials, and the outdoor area.

Classroom Set-up

When the students start their day in any Montessori program, the goals are that they see a warm, clean, and appealing environment with ample room for moving around. All the materials the students can choose from during the day are organized and complete. The students feel comfortable, safe, and special. They see that an organized environment saves time and helps them learn. These goals are not possible in an unorganized, dirty, or crowded environment.

While each Montessori program has similar goals, the physical environment changes slightly from each level to the next. The



The Montessori elementary environment provides students with adequate physical space

environment in an elementary program is not set up exactly the same as in an early childhood program, but is designed to both accommodate and challenge the developing skills and changing needs of elementary students. One change the elementary environment needs to accommodate is that the students need space for their growing bodies. Another is that, given a choice, elementary students increasingly prefer to work in groups. For the most part, the classroom designed for a lower elementary program is the same as the one designed for an upper elementary program.

What remains unchanged from early childhood to elementary is that the designed environment is one of the main educators of the students. Ideally, the well-designed elementary environment has these characteristics:

- shows beauty, order, and serenity
- displays materials that are attractive, complete, and in working order



The Montessori environment inspires students to explore materials and concepts for themselves

- stimulates the students' imaginations and inspires them to explore materials and concepts for themselves
- accommodates the students' physical, cognitive, and social needs
- appeals to all five of the students' senses (taste, smell, touch, sight, and hearing)
- allows the students to correct themselves through their own experience
- provides natural, real-life, hands-on materials as much as possible
- encourages the students to learn to the best of their abilities
- provides the students with room to move reasonably easily and safely without

disturbing others

- helps the students develop independence and self-discipline and confidence to choose and carry out activities by themselves
- promotes the students developing a strong and positive relationship with the classroom, including everyone and everything in it

As the list above shows, the teacher needs to design the environment carefully so that each student can learn to the best of her/his ability, develop a rapport with the classroom, and benefit fully from the elementary experience. The teacher needs to inspect and assess the environment regularly, to make sure that it continues to accomplish these goals. Most teachers do

a short assessment at the start of each day before the students arrive, then a more detailed assessment a few times a month. Certainly the teacher should do an assessment if the students' behavior (e.g., wandering aimlessly) indicates that there is a problem.

A short assessment might involve the teacher walking slowly through an unoccupied classroom while considering questions like these:

- Is my first impression that the environment is clean, orderly, beautiful, calm, and welcoming?
- Are materials and equipment clean, complete, and in working order?
- Are the materials displayed correctly, according to Montessori principles?
- Is there nutritious food ready for the students to prepare and eat if they are hungry?
- Do I see anything jarring or distracting, and what shall I do about that?

A longer, more detailed assessment might involve the teacher walking through the entire environment, identifying possible problem areas and thinking about creative ways of solving those problems. This assessment would look closely at specific areas within the indoor environment, where materials associated with certain subjects, such as math, science, and language arts, are clustered, as well as in the outdoor environment, to see whether any changes need to be made. The teacher might consider questions like these:

- Does the environment provide space for me to make effective presentations to small groups?
- Does the environment provide enough space for the students to work individually as well as in groups?
- Do I need to introduce any new materials?
- Do I need to remove any materials and equipment that the students are not using?
- Is there space for gross motor activities such as acting out a play?
- Do I need to change the space in some way?
- Where can I find space to include a new activity?
- Is everyone caring well for the environment?

The following sections describe many of the issues involved in designing the environment and offer suggestions for what a typical designed environment might contain. Each section describes preparations for a different part of the environment: classroom, materials, activities that can take place outside the main classroom, and the outdoor area.

Each Montessori elementary classroom will look different from every other, depending on the building and the human and financial resources available. Some Montessori programs have their own buildings, but many set up classrooms in part of an existing building, such as a church hall or

community center or school. Some classrooms have more space than others. The outside of each classroom will look different, too. There may be a large outdoor area with a hard-surface court and some climbing platforms. There may be grass and flowers around the edge of the outdoor area, and room for a garden, or there may be no outdoor space at all.

With so many possible variations, every Montessori classroom is bound to be unique. However, all have these features in common:

- All must meet certain government regulations. These regulations are designed to make sure that students are well cared for and kept safe from harm. These regulations might determine the number of students who can attend a program, how many teachers there must be, how many toilets, whether glassware can be used, what material the playground must use under the swings, and so on.
- All classrooms are designed to show warmth and beauty and to display furniture and to contain materials carefully chosen to take into account independence, control of error, and normalization. These are universal Montessori features that appear in the design of virtually every Montessori classroom.

It is common for the first-year Montessori teacher to fret over which shelves to place materials on and how to arrange the shelves in the classroom. As mentioned above, each classroom is unique in design and each teacher has his/her individual selection of materials to display. It is simply not possible for every classroom to look the same, and it is not possible for this guide to provide advice on specific classroom arrangement, other than to recommend that each teacher observe the following important goals:

- The classroom appears welcoming, beautiful, light, airy, and ordered.
- What is displayed is only what is necessary at one time.
- As much as is reasonably possible, materials are clustered on shelves in a logical, subject-oriented manner.
- The students have free and comfortable movement.
- All parts of the room are available to the students.
- The materials attract and are attractive to the students.
- The teacher can easily see the students at all times.
- The set-up encourages social connections and interactions among the students.

The following sections will describe briefly the basics of a typical Montessori elementary classroom: ample space, visibility for the teacher, focus on materials,