

# Joyful Scholars: Montessori for the Elementary years

Should we stay, or is this the right time to move?

By Tim Seldin, International Montessori Council

## What makes Montessori elementary different?

With so much going on, when you observe an elementary Montessori class at work you may find it difficult to get a sense of the big picture. Over here some students are working on math, some are reading, while others are working on science. In the corner, a teacher is giving a lesson to a small group of children, while occasionally glancing up to keep an eye on the rest of the class. The elementary classroom may appear to be unstructured, but this seemingly random, yet obviously purposeful activity, is basic to the independent learning and self-directed activity of the Montessori approach.

Each child is considered as an individual. We can see a vast range in the level of curriculum on which the children are engaged. Montessori teachers strive to challenge each according to his or her developmental needs and abilities.

"Montessori elementary gives children the opportunity to continue to progress at their own pace in an environment that nurtures a love of learning. Children take responsibility for their own learning and have daily opportunities to make decisions and choices in a child centered classroom. They are exposed to many complex concepts at an early age through the use of wonderful concrete learning materials. It is not unusual to see seven-year-olds in a Montessori classroom constructing atomic and molecular models. Nine-year-olds analyze the squares of trinomials, while ten-year-olds solve algebraic equations and twelve-year-olds compute the square root of large numbers. What parent who has watched her children thrive both intellectually and socially in the Children's House wouldn't want this to continue in the elementary years?"

## Basic Components of the Elementary Montessori Program

"The passage to the second level of education is the passage from the sensorial, material level to the abstract. The need for abstraction and intellectual activity makes itself felt around the seventh year.

Before age seven, the child focuses himself on a sensorial exploration and classification of the relationships between concrete objects - not exploration on the intellectual plane. The three to seven year old generally is content to know WHAT something is, along with a simplistic explanation of its function. The older child is oriented toward intellectual discovery and investigation.

In the second period, the child needs wider boundaries for his social experiences. He needs to establish social relationships in a larger society and the traditional schools, as they have been conceived for so long, can no longer be sufficient for him. He feels the closed environment as a constraint, which is why children of this age may no longer go to school enthusiastically. He prefers to catch frogs or play with his friends without adult supervision. An education that suppresses the true nature of the child is an education that leads to the development of unhappy and socially immature adults.

It is at age seven that one can note the beginning of an orientation toward the judgement of acts as right or wrong, fair or unfair... This preoccupation belongs to a very special interior sensitivity, the conscience. The seven to twelve year old period, then, constitutes one of particular importance for moral education... The adult must be aware of the evolution that is occurring in the mind of the child at this time and adapt his methods to conform with it. These three characteristics-the child's felt need to escape the closed environment, the passage of the mind to the abstract, and the birth in him of a moral sense-serve as the basis for a scheme at the elementary level."

Dr Maria Montessori

## Multi-Age Class Groups

Elementary Montessori classes continue to bring children of different age levels together. Normally classes will span three age/grade levels, with the common divisions being ages 6 to 9 (grades 1-3 in the United States) and ages 9 to 12 (grades 4-6). Some schools may follow a somewhat different scheme of grouping their children.

There are many reasons why Montessori classes group children of several grade levels together:

- Since Montessori allows children to progress through the curriculum at their own pace, there is no academic reason to group children according to one grade level.
- In a mixed age class, children can always find peers who are working at their current level.
- To accommodate the needs of individual learners, Montessori classrooms have to include curriculum to cover the entire span of interests and abilities up through the oldest and most accelerated students in the class. This creates a highly enriched learning environment.
- In multi-level classrooms, younger children are constantly stimulated by the interesting work that the older ones are engaged in
- At the same time, in multi-level classrooms older students serve as tutors and role models for the younger ones, which helps them in their own mastery (we learn things best of all when we teach them to someone else) and leaves them with a tremendous sense of pride.
- By working with children for three years, teachers get to know them extremely well.
- And, finally, there is a strong sense of continuity in the elementary Montessori class because two-thirds of the children return each September for either their second or third year with the same teacher(s). Most of the children know one another and understand the culture of the class. This makes it much easier to orient new children into the group.

## Friendships and Community

One of the things that you will normally see when you enter an elementary classroom is joy, excitement and enthusiasm. These are not children who are given dittos over and over again. These are children who are engaged.

Montessori schools are normally small close-knit communities of children, teachers, and parents. They are like an extended family. Everyone knows everyone else. Children become close and remain friends with their teachers and both younger and older classmates. They grow up and study together for many years. While there may not be as many other children in the school to form your children's circle of friends as they would find in a larger school, their friendships will tend to be closer and will last a lifetime.

The social life of the Montessori elementary is defined by the fact that students can move around. They don't have to sit at a desk all day long. Students work together most of the time, either helping one another master skills or information, or working together on group projects.

Parents are normally very involved at the elementary level as partners in supporting their children's education. They often come in to teach special lessons, take small groups out into the community for field trips, and help with celebrations and special trips.

## Academics

The elementary Montessori classroom offers an environment in which children tend to blossom! This may sound like propaganda, but it's true!

Dr. Montessori was convinced that children are born curious, creative, and intelligent. In designing the elementary program, she was attempting to cultivate this human potential, nurture the spontaneous curiosity with which all children are born, and inspire a sense of wonder in their spirits.

The elementary years are the primary sensitive period for the acquisition of what has recently come

to be known as cultural literacy. Older children want to know the reason why things are as they are found in the world. They are oriented toward intellectual investigation and discovery.

Here lies one of the significant differences between Montessori education and the schools most children attend. In many classrooms, the primary focus (up to 80% of the school year) is spent on teaching the 'Basic Skills' of reading, spelling and mathematics.

From the Montessori perspective, the 'Basics' are not basic curriculum at all; they represent enabling skills which make it possible for the child to gain access to the real substance of one's education: science, history, the arts, great literature, world culture, politics, economics, and philosophy.

Montessori teaches for both the "basics" and cultural literacy.

Children are born curious and highly motivated to learn new things. Why is it that so many teachers bore their students with facts that must be memorized and forgotten once the test is passed, when children are so easily excited about the world. Why do so many schools continue to feed children intellectual pabulum when they are ready for real food for their intellects?

## **The Three Elements of the Elementary Montessori Curriculum**

The elementary Montessori curriculum is highly enriched and challenging and is organized into three elements:

### **1. Mastery of Fundamental Skills and Basic Core Knowledge**

Montessori evolved out of the European tradition of academic excellence, and offers a rigorous course of study even in the elementary years. Elementary Montessori students explore the realm of mathematics, science and technology, the world of myth, great literature, history, world geography, civics, economics, anthropology, and the basic organization of human societies. Their studies cover the basics found in traditional curriculum, such as the memorization of math facts, spelling lessons, and the study of vocabulary, grammar, sentence analysis, creative and expository writing, and library research skills.

Sometimes, because Montessori places so much emphasis on cultivating children's sense of curiosity and wonder, parents may get the impression that students can simply do whatever they wish, avoiding subjects that they dislike. This is certainly not the case in any well-run class.

### **2. Dr. Montessori's "Great Lessons":**

The Great Lessons are five key areas of interconnected studies traditionally presented to all elementary Montessori students in the form of inspiring stories and related experiences and research projects.

The Great Lessons include the story of how the world came to be, the development of life on the Earth, the story of humankind, the development of language and writing, and the development of mathematics. They are intended to give children a "cosmic" perspective of the Earth and humanity's place within the cosmos. The lessons, studies, and projects surrounding each of the Great Lessons normally span many months and the questions that the children pose and their efforts to find the answers to their own questions may continue for many years.

"Education between the ages of six and twelve is not a direct continuation of that which has gone before, (although it is built upon that foundation). Psychologically there is a decided change in personality (within the child), and we recognize that nature has made this a period for the acquisition of culture, just as the former was for the absorption of environment.

We are confronted with a considerable development of consciousness... and there is an unusual demand on the part of the child to know the reason (why things work or why things are the way they are).

Knowledge can best be given where children are eager to learn, and this is the period when the seeds of learning can be sown, the child's mind being like a fertile field, ready to receive what will germinate into the culture of the adult community.

The secret of good teaching is to regard the child's intelligence as a fertile field in which seeds may be sown, to grow under the heat of flaming imagination. Our aim is not only to make the child understand, and still less to force him to memorize, but so to touch his imagination as to enthuse him to his innermost core. We do not want complacent pupils, but eager ones. We seek to sow life in the child rather than theories, to help him in his growth, mental and emotional as well as physical and for that we must offer grand and lofty ideas to the human mind.

If the idea of the universe is presented to the child in the right way, it will do more for him than just arouse his interest; for it will create in him admiration and wonder, a feeling loftier than any interest and more satisfying. But if neglected during this period, or frustrated in its vital needs, the mind of the child becomes artificially dulled, and henceforth will resist imparted knowledge. Interest will no longer be present if the seeds of learning are sown too late, but at six, children receive all items of culture enthusiastically. As the child grows older, these seeds will expand and grow. How many seeds should we sow? My answer is: "As many as possible!"

Dr Maria Montessori

### 3. Individually Chosen Research:

Elementary students are encouraged to explore topics that capture their imagination. Most former Montessori students look back on this aspect of the elementary program with particular fondness in later years.

Elementary Montessori students rarely use textbooks. They are encouraged to explore topics that capture their imagination. Students do a great deal of independent reading and library research. Children gather information, assemble reports, assemble portfolios and handmade books of their own, and teach what they have learned to their friends.

The approach is largely based on library research, with children gathering information, assembling reports, teaching what they have learned to their fellows, and assembling portfolios and handmade books of their own.

Beginning by simply using an encyclopedia to find the answers to a list of questions prepared by their teachers, Montessori students are taught how to use reference materials, libraries, and even the Internet to gather information and uncover the facts. Their oral presentations and written research reports grow in sophistication and complexity over the years.

And so, in closing, I invite you to take a close look at the kind of child that your child has become today at four or five, and ask yourself, what would you like her to be like when she's eighteen? By what set of values do you hope she will live? Do you pray that she will still love school and be excited about learning? If so, then you've laid the right foundation by sending her to Montessori thus far. Like my family and so many millions of others like us, you've taken the first step. And now the question is "what's next?"

I invite you to follow those of us who have gone before down the Montessori path, and discovered it to be the best decision that we could have made for our children.

What your son or daughter has experienced thus far is just the first step in the journey, and the best is yet to come.

Tim Seldin