



National Newsletter

January 2011

Newsletter for Parents of SAMA Member Schools

Dear Parents,

In previous newsletters, I have written about the planes of development that Montessori identified, and shown how each has its own sensitivities and special needs.

The concept of vertical grouping – where children of mixed ages share an environment prepared especially to meet their developmental needs has also been explored. But, what ARE the benefits to the child actually being in each environment for the full three years of any given cycle? Does it matter if the child only has one year of the 3-6 years (Children's House) class before moving into a Montessori Primary unit?

The three year cycle can be likened to the famous 'three-period-lesson' that Montessorians use to introduce new concepts to children. The three period lesson follows this format:

- This is blue. (Teacher places a blue tablet in front of the child.) She does this with two other colours, each shown in isolation. This first stage is the initial experience.
- The second period has the child confronted with all three of the tablets – and the teacher now giving various directives. Show me blue. Place red on the mat etc. The child is now experiencing the new knowledge. Playing around with it. Looking at it from different perspectives.
- In the last stage, the child is given one tablet at a time in isolation and asked to name it. In this way the teacher "tests" the child's knowledge. Has he internalised the new concept?

The three year cycle follows this pattern as well. The work of the three year old is exploration of their environment. They are blessed with the power of an absorbent mind which helps to soak up all the information around them. Thus, the more stimulating the environment, the more experiences the child will have. This first and critical year provides the teacher with the opportunity to observe the interests of the child and to provide materials that will strengthen development – on ALL levels – physically, socially, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually.

These five aspects of the child's development are addressed again in the second year of the child's journey through the Montessori preschool. Now the child is 'playing around' with the concepts introduced in the first year. An obvious, external sign of this would be the child who begins to explore with the sensorial materials and realises that the pink tower and the broad stair have similarities, and match perfectly together if placed in a certain way. This 'extension' work provides the child with the opportunity to further explore the environment, but at a deeper level.

The preparation for the Primary class, starts in the third year of the preschool cycle. Here the child is testing himself, by putting into practice the information and skills he has acquired over the past two years. This is seen in children writing, reading and performing mathematical operations. Their quest for knowledge doesn't abate, and they are still thirsting for cultural knowledge, now developing more directed questions, wanting to know *how* things fit together, and making connections across the disciplines of, for example, geography and biology. The fauna and flora of the different biomes of the world are understood because they have *concretely*

experienced puzzle maps and pouches of pictures with animals and plants from the different natural regions of the world.

Affording your child the three year cycle not only stimulates and gives opportunity for intellectual growth, but the social/emotional cycle grows exponentially as well. There is a time and place to be the littlest, and to have the role models of older children, and there is a time to be the 'big-ones', supporting the new children. Montessori said that the children in the preschool environment form a kind of 'society of cohesion'. They are in harmony through their work and their relationships with the others also working in their prepared environments. They have freedom, which if exercised with the appropriate boundaries develops their inner-discipline.

Throughout the three year cycle, the Montessori teacher spends time observing and directing the child towards work. Because she has a three year cycle within which to work with each child, she has the flexibility to allow children to work at their own pace – giving time to those who need longer to acquire certain skills, and allowing those who are ready to move beyond.

I wish you all the very best experience with your Montessori child this year!

Heidi van Staden

SAMA President