

Montessori 101

Principle 1: Classes in Montessori schools are mixed -age and non-graded

Dear Parents

Thank you for your wonderful feedback on the last newsletter and for the consistent support you offer SAMA member schools.

We have received many requests from teachers at member schools to explain the Montessori fundamental principles as set out by SAMA to parents. We have therefore planned the next 6 newsletters to cover the basic principles that all SAMA member schools are required to follow.

The first principle we will explore is the importance of mixed-age groups working together in a non-graded setting. Mixed-age classes comprise of at least three-year age groupings which correspond to the Planes of Development [0 – 3; 3 – 6; 6 – 9 and 9 – 12 (or 6 – 12); 12 – 15 and 15 – 18 (or 12 – 18)] set out by Dr Montessori.

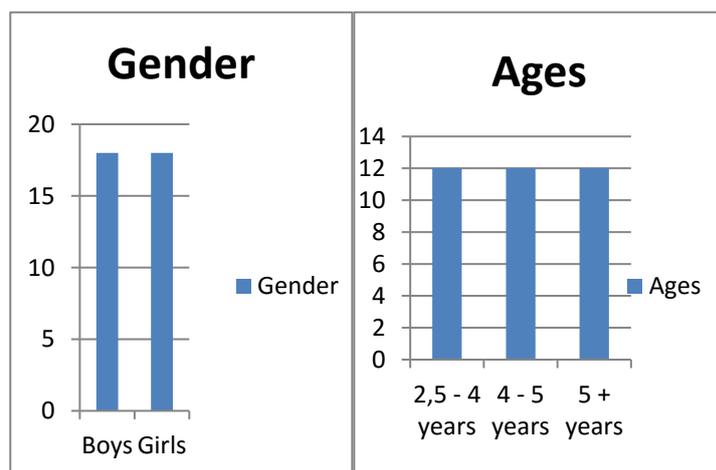
It is imperative that the understanding of adults embraces that mixed-age groups are not correlated to grades, nor are they divided in other ways according to achievement levels or normative standards.

An essential part of the learning environment is the other children in it with their varying abilities, strengths and weaknesses across the areas of development (cognitive, physical, social and emotional). The Montessori classroom provides ample opportunities for making friends and interacting with others. Learning consideration for others; how to co-operate with others and fostering a sense of interdependence are vital life skills.

In a well-prepared environment co-operation and a sense of community are experienced. Individual differences are easily accepted and appreciated while each child is treated and taught as an individual. Children of different ages are together in the same group which provides abundant opportunities for learning and helps to create a sense of family while everyone contributes and takes responsibility for the functioning and maintenance of the environment.

Montessori said that children should enjoy learning saying that *“one test of the correctness of educational procedure is the happiness of the child.”* In a class that practices vertical grouping, the children see learning as a labour of discovery, exploration, play, excitement and joy. Learning does not just mean getting ready for the next grade. To become lifelong learners, children must see their work as rewarding, meaningful and absolutely enjoyable.

These mixed age classrooms should strike a heterogeneous balance of gender, race and ability within each age level. Each age group should be roughly equal in number, to avoid becoming "top" or "bottom" heavy. The following charts used to illustrate the concept are based on a class of 36 children in a preschool (3 – 6 years) environment. The same would apply to the other age groups, with the exception of toddlers, where there are generally fewer children in the group.



It is important for each school to try provide a blend of cultures and wide demographic base which includes race, language, religion, socio-economic standing, etc.

“Our method has the advantage of being able to draw together children of very different backgrounds. In our first Children’s Houses there were children of 2 ½, still too young for the simplest exercises of the senses, and children over five who, because of their attainments, could have passed after a few months into the third grade. In our schools each child advances and perfects himself according to his own individual ability. ...Our experiences have shown that a single teacher can supervise children ranging from the ages of three to seven. ... As far as the teacher is concerned, she can remain a whole day with children of such different stages of development without exhausting herself, just as a mother at home passes the entire day from morning to night with her children without growing tired.”

Montessori: The Discovery of the child

This environment provides opportunities for a variety of safe, lasting and meaningful friendships. Both social and intellectual development is enhanced by this method.

Each year holds a special significance for the child as the roles they fill change. Because of the mixed age group the classroom has a heritage. In the ideal multi - age classroom the same group of children stay together for at least three years with the same Guide. This three-year age span offers a greater opportunity for establishing the group as a "family" and provides each child with a three year time frame for development.

Grouping in a Montessori environment is based on the developmental planes and is designed to allow development at the individual’s pace. Because of this we can cater for a wide range of developmental needs for each child.

It makes sense that every child will advance more quickly in some areas than others. For example; if a child is mastering material quickly the teacher will simply give a lesson on more complex materials which will already be in the classroom for the older children. If a child is having difficulty grasping a particular concept, the child is allowed to focus on that area until he is ready to move on.

It is imperative that Montessorians are trained in child development in the given age range they work with. The toddler environment is not a watered down 3 – 6 class. The needs and style of learning of the elementary children are not the same as those of the plane before.

Appropriate Montessori training enables the adult to present the curriculum in a manner that best fits the child, rather than making the child fit the curriculum.

The Montessori curriculum is a sequential programme designed for independent learning. From the moment a child enters a Montessori environment, we are concerned with the on-going development of the "whole child": intellectual, physical, emotional, spiritual and social.

In the final year of the Montessori preschool classroom, the five-year-old blossoms. There is an explosion of learning and intense working knowledge of the advanced materials. The five-year-old leads the class with dignity, self-esteem and self-confidence; three qualities which enable a child to approach new social challenges in life. The same can be said for the final year in the elementary, middle or high school.



Parents need to be aware that the cycle is completed in the third (or sixth in elementary) year and not the second. If the child leaves before he has not received the full benefit of our programme nor has he had time to complete his learning in our curriculum. To deprive the five-year-old of this experience is to deprive him of his year of leadership.

Because of the three-year period the adult does not have to dissect the child's learning into curricular pieces, but rather is able to support each child's natural learning rate with the gift of

time. This time together makes the adult aware of each child's academic, social, physical and emotional strengths and they are therefore able to offer the child greater support because they know how to work best with each child and are better able to guide the child's learning and provide appropriate challenges. In return the child grows more comfortable and secure with the guidance of the adult. This stresses the importance of the commitment of the adult to remain with a group of children for a minimum of three years.

Throughout the extended life of a mixed - age classroom, the adults (Guide and parent) have more time to get to know one another and can become true partners in the child's education.

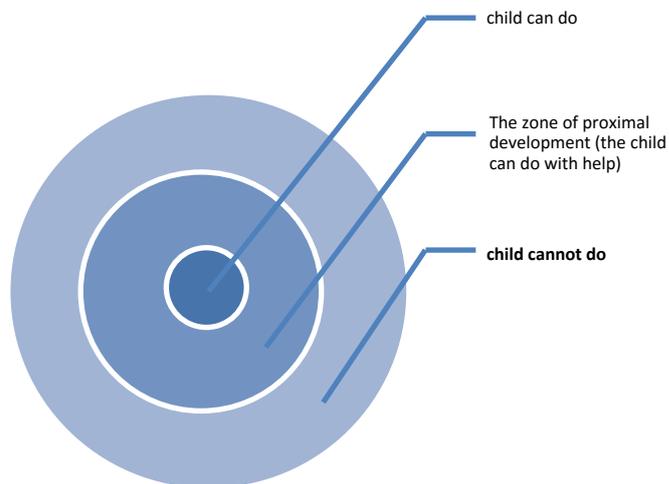
Another phenomenon in the vertically grouped Montessori environment is that the children have to co-ordinate the use of the materials with each other, they learn to co - operate and negotiate with each other.



The benefits for the older child include the opportunity to provide guidance and act as mentors for the younger children. They reinforce their skills and knowledge as well as benefiting from the satisfaction of helping others when they help those younger or less capable than themselves. This heritage of responsibility and helping others is passed down in the class.

It is not only the older children who benefit from this type grouping. Vygotsky (1976) envisioned a "zone of proximal development". This zone is the distance between the actual development that can be enhanced by adults or more capable peers.

Meltzer (1991) uses the term "scaffolding" to describe the process when adults or more capable peers can encourage



younger children to use more sophisticated approaches to tasks. Meltzer suggests that adults or more capable peers can give children temporary support to help them accomplish tasks beyond their current independent capabilities. (I.e. Journal writing, the presence of an older child might prompt a younger child to use words, spelling or concepts that the younger child would not ordinarily use on his own.

Younger children usually want to do what the older children are doing. A vertically grouped Montessori classroom offers an inherent motivator for children to constantly challenge themselves.

The younger child learns through observation of the older child. He receives indirect preparation for later work as he watches and begins to absorb the activities of the older child. The younger child need not wait for the Adult for assistance as he is able to consult a more experienced peer. The mixed - age classroom naturally entails different levels of ability and therefore offers diversity, stimulation and a path for growth integral to the success of the Montessori philosophy.

Warm regards,

Kym

PS: I look forward to your feedback and any questions you may have on the content of this newsletter.

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