



SAMA

South African Montessori Association

Position Statement: Grade R

**A Montessori response to the National Grade R Curriculum
(National Curriculum Statement and CAPS)
and the proposed National ECD Curriculum**

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Introduction

Montessori educators support the goals stated in White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Development (DOE 2001) whereby “the government aims to close the poverty gap by providing quality programmes for five year olds and in so doing give effect to our Constitution,” and “redressing the ECD challenge facing us in respect of children younger than 5 years.”¹

Grade R / Grade 0 is a formulation created by the Department of Basic Education to refer to the year which precedes Grade 1 in the formal, compulsory schooling sector. In this year five and six year old children are taught specific skills and concepts deemed necessary for Grade 1 learning. These skills are valued by some educators as indicators of readiness for formal learning.

The Montessori approach is based on an understanding of human development that supports the learning and growth of children in a different way. In common with other developmental approaches to early learning, Montessori sees a distinct difference between the first phase of childhood and second, which begins with the Grade 1 year. Montessori schools therefore align learning experiences to the developmental stages of the child, rather than to pre-defined skills demanded by a curriculum.

The Montessori programme is aimed at preparing the child for life, not only for their first year of formal schooling. The Montessori 0 – 6 year old programme provides a *developmental* foundation for formal schooling, and thus “school readiness.” Children in Montessori environments are supported in building their skills progressively and holistically, in developmentally appropriate ways.

Montessori pedagogy requires that this learning take place in mixed age groups, in carefully prepared environments and through the use of tried and tested didactic materials. Our teachers are trained to assess the developmental needs of children through a variety of observation techniques. Montessori education is based on more than a century of ongoing research around the world and in all socio-economic contexts.² Our curriculum, methodology and underpinning principles are mutually dependent and non-negotiable.

The Education Department’s National Curriculum for Grade R identifies three learning areas for the pre-school child:

- Life Skills
- Home Language (Literacy)
- Mathematics (Numeracy)

The Montessori curriculum and pedagogy

The Montessori approach to education is a total, integrated approach which requires an integration of curriculum, pedagogy, environmental design and teacher preparation for its success.³

The Montessori 0 – 6 curriculum incorporates all three areas required in the NCS in an integrated curriculum and methodology. We do, however, offer them in a way that differs both qualitatively and quantitatively from the National Curriculum.

¹. Western Cape Education Department Foundation Phase Training manual- Grade R

². For an overview of research see Lillard, A.,(2005) *Montessori, The Science Behind the Genius*. (OUP, Oxford).

³. See for example Haines, A. (2005) The totality of Montessori. 25th International Congress. Available from Association Montessori Internationale; Lillard, A. (2012) Preschool children’s development in classic Montessori, supplemented Montessori, and conventional programs. *Journal of School Psychology* 50 (379–401).

The Montessori curriculum encompasses

- Activities of everyday living
- Language
- Mathematics
- Sensorial development
- Knowledge & understanding of the world
- Arts

The Southern African Montessori Association has identified six basic principles of practice⁴ essential to the integrity of the Montessori approach. All of these are impacted upon by the introduction of Grade R, and by the moves towards a standardized 0 – 4 curriculum. Certain issues are critical to the Montessori approach. Only those directly relevant in the context of Grade R are discussed here:

- The importance of mixed age groups
- The importance of spontaneous activity
- Pedagogical principles

1. The Importance of Mixed Age Groups

The Montessori curriculum and Montessori pedagogy follows the developmental stages of the child, and is dependent on mixed age groupings for its success:

These groupings are as follows:

- Nido or infant group: from birth to when the child is moving about independently – 12 to 18 months
- Toddler group: from 12 to 18 months to 2½ to 3 years
- Preschool group: 2½ to 3 years to 6 years.
- Elementary/Primary group: 6 – 12 years.

Children move from the Preschool group into either Grade 1 in a conventional school or the 6 – 12 (primary) group in a Montessori School.

The Montessori curriculum and pedagogy require that, for the preschool and primary levels, children are accommodated in non-graded mixed age groupings of at least three years.⁵

Mixed age grouping:

- promotes the development of healthy peer relations and a sense of community
- stimulates learning, especially in the social and language domains
- provides support and emotional scaffolding by other children
- allows for individual and small group teaching, which introduces children to new concepts at age-appropriate levels.

2. The importance of Spontaneous Activity

Montessori education is premised upon the principle of spontaneous activity. The Montessori classroom is a specially prepared environment where a range of carefully designed materials is made available to the children. Children are free to choose their own activities from what is provided, and work undisturbed for as long as they wish. The role of the adult is focused on providing only that support which is absolutely necessary. This support is similar to the

⁴ . Attached.

⁵ . There is ample research supporting the efficacy of such groupings. See for example : Anderson, R. H. and Pavan, B. H. (1993) *Non-Gradedness: Helping it to Happen*. Technomic Publishing, Lancaster, PA.

'scaffolding' envisaged by Lev Vygotsky. Children thus learn to work and play with minimal adult direction, developing a high degree of self-regulation and autonomy. Through observation and consistent, careful record keeping, teachers are able to determine what intervention is necessary to promote optimal learning.

Adherence to a sequential curriculum such as that proposed by the NCS and CAPS would undermine this aspect of the Montessori approach.

3. Pedagogical principles

3.1 Choice

Montessori education at all levels is based on the active participation of the child, and draws on the enthusiasm developed through free choice. It is the child's interest that drives exactly what will be focused on at any time.

3.2 Time

Montessori education presupposes that children enjoy working undisturbed for long periods of time. In a properly prepared Montessori environment which offers the full range of experiences outlined in the Montessori curriculum, a normally developing child will cover the Montessori curriculum in the three year cycle.

3.3 Concretized abstraction

The Montessori materials are not conventional educational toys and are not designed to be used as such. Rather they are what has been called 'concretized abstractions'. Every set of materials represents an abstract idea that the child comes to understand through manipulating the objects. The teacher then introduces the child to the appropriate vocabulary with which to verbalise his understanding. This represents a significant pedagogical principle which is directly opposite to that which underpins conventional teaching. In Montessori the child *understands* first, then is taught the language of that concept. In conventional teaching, language and explanation is understood to precede understanding.

Furthermore, the materials embody what is called 'control of error'. This means that the design of the material enables the child to perceive his own mistakes without the direct intervention of the adult.

Because of the importance of learning from the manipulation of concrete objects, Montessori pre-schools do not utilize two-dimensional worksheets nor engage with abstract concepts and memorization at this early age. Thus in a Montessori school children engage with advanced abstract ideas in very concrete forms long before they are able to provide evidence of abstractions that would normally be acquired through rote-learning.

3.4 Indirect preparation

Children are supported in developing the skills which combine to allow for such advanced skills as writing and reading. These experiences follow a different trajectory to that envisaged in either the 0 – 4 or the Grade R curricula.

This may result in the appearance that children in Montessori schools are 'behind' their peers in certain areas. For example, whereas children in a conventional school will recite simple number bonds by rote, or count forwards and backwards, a Montessori child may not do so. On the other hand, the child in a Montessori 3 – 6 years class will have a foundation of understanding of the decimal system including the notion that 100 is a square number and 1000 is a cube. Thus a solid foundation for later abstraction is prepared well before rote knowledge is acquired.

Experience in Montessori classes has shown that when children have the appropriate preparatory experiences, they are able to combine separate aspects of learning and ‘explode’ into complex learning. Hence a child will not necessarily work through short, phonetically regular words before moving on to longer words. The normal graded sequence of learning simply does not apply in the Montessori classroom.

School Readiness

Montessori, like many other developmentally informed approaches, is based on the understanding that certain aspects of development cannot be rushed by means of direct instruction. The Montessori pre-school programme supports the development of skills that are refined as the child approaches the age of formal schooling. A child who has experienced developmentally appropriate support in the early years is able to integrate and apply these to the demands of the conventional classroom when he or she reaches formal school going age. These skills are not limited to cognitive function, but include social and emotional skills, physical development and control of movement, creative ability, self-direction and concentration, as well as the ethical and moral awareness which is prioritized in the Montessori approach.

Children are deemed ready for Grade 1 once they have reached the appropriate level of development, assessed holistically and individually rather than in accordance with a timeline of required competencies. In a Montessori pre-school, a child will only be assessed for school readiness once they have reached the appropriate age, namely the year before that child is due to enter Grade 1.

Curriculum Areas

Life Skills

In Montessori education, the child engages in activities of daily living. These are practical activities that are meaningful to the child, while at the same time developing physical and cognitive skills, concentration, confidence and autonomy.

Because of the mixed age structure of the classes children develop strong interpersonal skills, and in their final year in the group are able to develop leadership skills that will support their transition into the new, formal schooling environment.

Through direct lessons in ‘grace and courtesy’, as well as through role modeling by the adult, children learn to value diversity and develop such social skills as respect, tolerance, accountability, gratitude and reverence.

Content knowledge

Montessori classes do not have weekly themes or prescribed content that all the children learn at the same time. Children are helped to become aware of the phenomena of nature in the indoor and outdoor learning environments, and develop an understanding of the cycles of nature, including the seasons. Children are introduced to knowledge and concepts in a wide range of subjects through concrete materials available at all times.

Creative Arts

Movement, role-play, singing, music and a range of visual arts activities are incorporated into the Montessori programme. These are often introduced as individual or small group experiences, rather than whole group activities.

Physical Development

Movement and active participation are integrated into every aspect of the Montessori environment, which also allows for extended periods of unstructured play. Development of gross and fine motor skills, as well as perceptual development, are incorporated into the programme at every level.

Home Language

The mixed age grouping of Montessori classrooms supports language development through peer scaffolding (zone of proximal development) as well as through carefully individualized direct instruction. Alongside the normal activities to develop language that are found in the conventional classroom, the Montessori curriculum favours the development of a rich vocabulary with an early, age appropriate introduction to grammatical structure, as well as focusing on phonemic awareness and preparation for writing. Many children in Montessori classrooms begin to write around the age of 4½ and may begin to read at age 5. Not all children develop at the same rate and no pressure is, therefore, brought to bear on the child. All children do, however, receive a solid foundation of the base skills necessary to progress in Grade 1.

Mathematics

Concepts normally regarded as essential for mathematical thinking are introduced and refined through the Montessori sensorial materials. The child is then introduced to number concepts within base 10, through concrete manipulative materials that not only lead him/her to counting but also develop an understanding of the decimal system before linear counting is encouraged. The sequence of learning of mathematical concepts in Montessori differs from that prescribed by CAPS.

Conclusion

The Montessori curriculum does not provide a separate Grade R year. The skills normally taught in the State Grade R curriculum are incorporated into the entire pre-primary phase in developmentally appropriate ways, consistent with the Montessori curriculum and pedagogical approach, so that children are prepared for the tasks they will face in either a conventional Grade 1 or a Montessori 6 – 12 environment.