

Please enjoy reading this lovely article pertaining to the Montessori classroom community. It comes from an American Montessori Internationale Journal and reminds us all that the young child's most important work comes not from learning sounds and numbers or where Europe is located on a map but rather from the work of creating themselves. This article pertains to what your young child participates in each day while in the Montessori classroom.

A Meditation on Large Class Size: “The Beautiful Functioning of the Small Society”

Jennifer Shields

Overheard while observing in a Montessori primary class:

Child A: Dum dum.

Child B: That's not a nice word.

A: It's a hard candy.

B: Who told you that?

A: My sister.

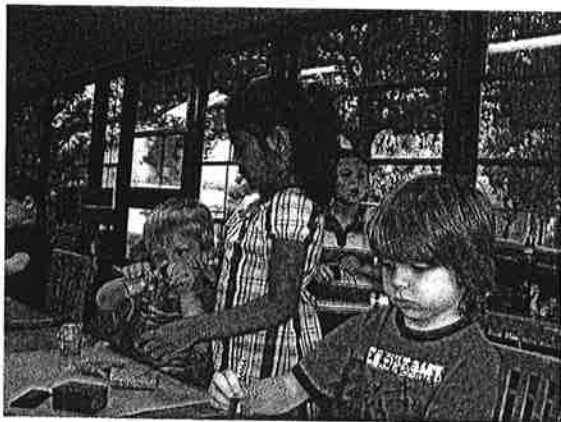
B: How old is she?

A: Seven.

I begin with this charming interchange between two young children to illustrate the free communication and exploration that can occur when we have a large and varied group of children in a Montessori class.

An essential element of a Montessori prepared environment is the mixed age group of children. And this group needs to be a substantial one: 24-35 children in a primary environment, led by a single trained teacher, with one assistant. Parents wonder why—most seek out the lowest adult to child ratio possible when they select a school.

As Montessorians, we understand that for a child's optimal development, a robust, large, diverse social group is best. When a school builds up classes that are stable (with children staying in primary for 3 or 4 years) and with a balanced age-range of children, a large class will foster those characteristics that will contribute to a child's success and happiness in life. In this environment of freedom, variety, and respect, a child can act upon his natural, inner drives and the adult's role is to support this process rather than to directly teach.



In a large class, children feel amongst their peers rather than under the scrutiny of the adult. They can be active physically and socially in this environment and experience the natural consequences of their individual activity. For example, if a three year-old child pours too much water into the basin when preparing to wash a table, she notices her error and can find a way to respond. She may dry the floor underlay with a drying cloth. She makes a mental note of the spill with no shame or fear. Next time she pours, she remembers that spill and strives to control the pitcher so the volume of water is appropriate. This feedback from the material is called “control of error” in Montessori parlance.

Through many such simple experiences and the freedom to make mistakes, along with the freedom to repeat, the child is self-motivated to improve. A learner who wants to learn because she is self-motivated is not a victim to external praise, rewards, or punishment. She finds satisfaction in her own process and is not fearful of judgment or error. This is a characteristic we see Montessori children carry with them throughout life.

While the teacher may observe a child's spill, as described, in a large class she is busy giving lessons, observing, and she respects each child's process of mastery of any material. She is careful to give the child space to experience consequences of actions and only intervenes if necessary.

The previous example is a physical one having to do with control of movement (pouring water). An older child may experience similar mistakes with a mathematics material such as counting the beads on a long chain. If he miscounts, he is unable to find a label for the last bead on a particular bead bar in the chain. The material's control of error gives him feedback that something is amiss. Without hesitation, without feeling intimidated or worried, he can recount from the last label and find his mistake. This child is persevering in the face of an error. If he has re-counted and still cannot find the label, he has choices: he can ask a classmate for assistance; he can ask an adult for assistance; or, he can try on his own again. This is entirely up to him. It is acceptable to ask for help when one needs it. It is acceptable to help others when they ask.

Compare this healthy experience of self-correction and determination to many of our own experiences in math. Did we feel rushed? Were we afraid we would get a bad grade? Did the lesson move on without our understanding and make us feel left behind or embarrassed or ashamed because the adult was in control, was grading, judging, and pacing our experiences? Did any child have the freedom to ask for help from other children or to offer help? The Montessori child has the time and space to move as deliberately or quickly as suits him. He has no awareness of any adult opinion or feedback regarding his work. The work is his!

The Montessori classroom is a new, small society, a home away from the child's home, where she can experience freedom and participate in dynamic exchanges with others. The youngest children observe their older classmates and absorb the class culture: we tuck in our chairs, we eat at the snack table, we love to work, etc. The older children have the opportunity to be models and take leadership and responsibility. Because there are so many children in a large class, the older children are aware that the adults cannot do all the helping or all the cleaning or the solving of problems.

For example, it is a common occurrence for a five year-old to eat snack with a three year-old: the older one washes his hands, pulls out his chair quietly, sits calmly at the table, and spreads his napkin on his lap. He takes an appropriate amount of food and chats between chewing, using a pleasant tone of voice. This powerful modeling is a strong influence on the little one. Children aged six and under have what Montessori called an "absorbent mind." Just by experiencing life around her, the child learns and becomes part of her culture. And in a humming class with classmates who have been in the class for one or two years already, a younger child has a hundreds of opportunities each day to absorb positive behaviors, rich and varied language, and share in the discoveries and explorations by her cohort.

A four-year-old using a movable alphabet may wonder how to make the sound "sh" in a word she is composing. She sees the guide is giving a lesson and notices a classmate nearby. She asks, "I am trying to write 'wish' and don't know the letters for 'sh.'" The older child matter-of-factly tells her which letters she needs.

Meanwhile, another child walking by hears this exchange, he too absorbing the new information.

As a primary teacher, I would often begin to give a lesson to a child only to realize she knew the sound of a sandpaper letter, or the name of a puzzle map piece, just from picking it up in her time in our bustling, stimulating environment. Surely, every child notices the garrulous group of children using the brilliant golden bead materials to act out addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division with four-digit numbers. Who can help but admire the gorgeous, impressive thousand cube and look forward to someday using it himself when she is ready? And who doesn't wonder about the gleaming chains she will count and how the long, long, golden one is also a thousand?

The lovely and important variety in a Montessori class includes ages of children, types of work, and the inevitable panoply of personalities—it is a diverse setting in which all have equal value. This atmosphere is non-competitive. The child experiences that all people are different and she has no need to worry she is behind or ahead of anyone else. Her success and discovery in no way takes away from the joy or success of any other person. Instead, all children celebrate the achievements of all. The efforts of a brand-new three year-old child to build the ten pink tower cubes in order of size is as valuable as the six year-old who traces each piece of a puzzle map onto large paper and labels (in cursive, from memory) every state in his map of the United States. One child's challenge may be to take off his sweater and hang it on his hook while another's is to decipher a set of phonetic labels to match corresponding objects.

Every person works to his own satisfaction, using the control of his own error built in to every material to self-assess. Children are self-motivated in this atmosphere and will work with true engagement. The social awareness, self-knowledge, and respect for others that a Montessori child gains are a lifelong qualities characteristic of a successful, healthy adult.



Children can slowly but surely grow in self-awareness in the safety of a large class. They have the time (three years!) and, in a way, the anonymity to find their way, both in their use of the didactic materials to make intellectual discoveries, but also in the social realm. In a smaller class, say of 12 children, it is impossible for the adult to step back and avoid being an obvious presence to the children. In the smaller class, there is no need for high levels of independence as the teacher can so obviously help. Children are not able to solve their own problems, have spontaneous conversations, or self-regulate when an adult is clearly scrutinizing their every move.

In their 2006 article in *Science Magazine*, Angeline Lillard and Nicole Else-Quest presented research comparing 5 year-olds and 12 year-olds from public Montessori and non-Montessori settings. One of their conclusions was: "Especially remarkable outcomes of the Montessori education are the social effects, which are generally dominated by the home environment."²

Instead of spending time listening to an adult, the children use materials that are interesting to them, that exactly meet their challenge level. This perfect, individual match allows a child to build up her skills and knowledge and feel competent and confident. It seems counterintuitive, but it is through meeting each child's individual needs that the children are better poised to interact successfully and peacefully.

*This is the simple secret... underlying the beautiful functioning of the small society – each child is acting; each child is occupied.*³

Because we have only one of each material, a child who wishes to use something another child is using realizes he must wait; in the meantime he chooses something else. The patience and respect that are garnered in this system become unconscious, lifelong characteristics of the Montessori child. A child who has years in this busy, invigorating environment becomes his own master. He slowly builds the ability to self-direct, to self-govern. This is a complex and mature accomplishment: to empathize with another person's needs, to stop oneself from asserting his own desire for gratification, and to redirect and make another choice. Isn't that what we call maturity? Modern educators term these abilities "executive functioning" and struggle to create direct lessons to directly and artificially teach children these attitudes. Instead, in the well-designed and fully implemented Montessori environment, children who are part of a robust, large group will develop this executive functioning naturally and joyfully, and will bring that maturity, empathy, and readiness to any situation they face whether in a Montessori setting or outside it. They embody

self-discipline.

An essential aspect of the Montessori environment is a busy buzz of activity, as in a humming beehive, where the children are free to communicate with each other.

Overheard: *"Do you know what? I have a ukulele and sometimes I play it as a violin."*

Children learn about others and about themselves through this free communication. A young child's brain is primed to absorb language, including vocabulary, grammar, tone, accent, and accompanying body language. The adult's responsibility is to support the child's immediate urge to connect with others. Children need opportunities to refine their communication. The more accurately and confidently a child can express herself, the better she can be understood. Additionally, researchers have found that the richer the language environment (the number of words) and the more positive in tone those words are, the greater a child's brain growth.⁴ The capable Montessori teacher is a wellspring for beautiful, accurate language and in a large class the opportunities abound for the adult to model language, to have conversations, to give vocabulary lessons, and to offer children literacy through writing and reading. Children have spontaneous conversations with each other, have lessons with the teacher, overhear stimulating interchanges, and have freedom to practice self-expression and the social behaviors that go along with words.

Little boy: *I'm playing doggie.*

Little girl: *OK. Play doggie by yourself.*

We foster independence in a large class; here, children have freedom from adult interference. The trained adult observes much, and gives mostly individual lessons.

*"This then is the first duty of an educator: to stir up life but leave it free to develop."*⁵

The children use material and find creative ways to solve their own problems. They practice self-control (commonly referred to as executive functioning) rather than responding to an adult asserting external control. For example, a three year-old child who is finished using a material will return it to the shelf so the next child can use it, even if he has a notion to eat snack next.

He returns the work for the good of the community, not because anyone tells him to do so. In little ways, he builds up positive will power so he can reign in impulses and deliberately make choices.

...if there are a great many children in the family, they are more normal [than a child without siblings] because the parents have not time to occupy themselves with each one of them with such intensity...So the conditions in a class in which there are many children and only one adult, is favorable to the child.⁶

Montessori children develop grit and self-confidence. Their mistakes, rather than defeating them, motivate them. They realize they can work hard, repeat, and get better and better results. This is a result of their own activity and is informed by the process of their own developing judgment. They do not gauge their success or worth by an adult's estimation, praise, rewards, or punishment. They have freedom to explore and make mistakes because the adult stays out of the child's work unless she is needed.

The highly skilled Montessori trained adult has practiced scientific, unobtrusive observation of children. She has delved deeply into child development theory. Through those experiences, she has winnowed her ability to ascertain when a child needs a clear limit set. If she decides a limit is necessary, this is always delivered in a positive, clear way (e.g., a child is waving a long, red rod in the air in a way to endanger others: "Erika, you may set the rod down on the rug. Would you like to trace its length?"). In another situation, the teacher may wait and observe events unfold. She asks herself, can this child handle the struggle or challenge at this moment? Perhaps she swoops in to give a slight hint or repeat one element of a demonstration, and then fades into the background once again. No child ever feels abandoned or scrutinized. The adult is keenly aware of the children's work and abilities while at the same time is keenly aware of their need for independence, self-assessment, and freedom. Many adults feel their role is to help the child whenever possible. The Montessori trained adult heeds Maria Montessori's insights into the child's process:

...discipline comes by an indirect route, by developing activity in spontaneous work. Every individual must find out how to control himself by his own efforts and through calm, silent activity which is directed towards no external aim but is meant to keep alive that inner flame on which our life depends.⁷

Friendliness with error and creative exploration are hallmark qualities of a lifelong learner.

Overheard, after I had recently gotten what I considered a chic,

short, pixie haircut:

Child A: Hey, look at that teacher. It's a man.

Child B: It's not a man. It's a girl. Go say hi to her.

Child A greets me, then returns to Child B.

Child B: What did her sound like?

After setting aside my pride and vanity, I marveled at the freedom and social exploration these children experience daily. The ability to greet an observing adult, appropriately, is evidence of confidence, grace and courtesy lessons, practice, and a burgeoning social awareness. Montessori teachers offer demonstrations on graceful movements necessary for successful maneuvering in the active, varied classroom. The children can practice carrying a chair, passing food at table, waiting in a line, or carrying a tray, for example, each in ways that will preserve the beautiful materials and hurt or disturb no other member of the class. Lessons on courtesy are demonstrations of social behaviors such as a handshake for greeting, how to introduce a person to someone new, how to greet a visitor, or how to offer a cup of tea to a guest. Children can practice these courtesies in small groups; play acting, at a safe, neutral moment.

When a real life situation arises in their class (or out in the world), the child may choose to enact this behavior and will be met by the mutual respect that the lessons model. In a large class, we see numerous opportunities daily for the children to interact. They are bound to encounter situations that require the social lubrication. As they progress in their social behavior, they can make mistakes and experience natural consequences. The adult never scolds or prompts the children to behave in a particular manner. Keep an eye on a Montessori child: she is one who knows how to shake an adult's hand; she tucks in her chair when she leaves a table; she looks a person in the eye when speaking; she can introduce herself to a person new to her. Comfort and confidence with these behaviors comes from lessons from the adult, to be sure, but cannot be perfected without many, many occasions to freely and safely repeat and master these skills.

In our large, beautiful, meticulously prepared classes, children are living in community and practicing how to be a member of their society in a safe environment. They are adapting to the larger culture and have myriad opportunities to interact, make choices, be independent, each building up her own personality in this kind, stimulating, and respectful atmosphere.

Child A: Why do you keep doing that?

Child B: Because I love you.

References

¹ Montessori, Maria. *Creative Development in the Child, Vol. 1* (154-55).

² Lillard, Angeline, and Else-Quest, N. *Science*. 29 September 2006, Vol. 313 (1894).

³ Montessori, Maria. *Creative Development in the Child, Vol. 2*. Kalakshetra Publications (70).

⁴ See Dana Suskind, Beth Suskind, and Leslie Lewinter-Suskind's book: *Thirty Million Words, Building a Child's Brain, Tune In, Talk More, Take Turns*, and the exciting work being done to help parents understand this connection at the Thirty Million Words Initiative.

⁵ Montessori, Maria. *The Discovery of the Child*. Montessori-Pierson Publishing (113).

⁶ Montessori, Maria. *Creative Development in the Child, Vol. 2*. Kalakshetra Publications (182).

⁷ Montessori, Maria. *The Discovery of the Child*. Montessori-Pierson Publishing (305).

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