

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE MONTESSORI CURRICULUM

By *Joanna Godbolt*
 Founder of *Casa Dei Bambini*

Montessori is a method of education which focuses on the child as an individual. Dr Maria Montessori, physician, anthropologist and pedagogue, studied children of all racial, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds for over fifty years. Her intense scientific observation of the human being from birth to maturity allowed her to distill a body of philosophical, psychological and pedagogical principles.



These, together with a vast range of auto-didactic materials, came to be known as the Montessori Method of Education.

The classroom

A Montessori classroom exists for the development of the child at his/her own pace; it is child-centered learning at its best. Montessori education is a comprehensive and continuous response to the vital exigencies of the total human being, adapted to each stage of development.



Walk into a Montessori classroom such as that at Casa Dei Bambini in Hong Kong, and you will invariably see happy and busy children working purposefully. The classroom itself will typically be beautiful and enticing. Great care has been taken to create a learning environment that will reinforce the child's independence and natural urge toward self-



development. This is achieved in three ways: beauty, order and accessibility.

The Montessori materials are beautifully handcrafted and are displayed on low open shelves. Each piece of material has a specific purpose and is presented to the children in a manner that will enable them to direct their own learning.

The Montessori materials are tools to stimulate the child into logical thought and discovery. They are provocative, enticing and simple. Each piece of material presents one concept or idea at a time and has what is known as a "control of error". If the child has done something incorrectly it will be self-evident. The geometric shape, for example, won't fit the hole; the water will spill on the table or the last label will not match the last picture. Being able to see his or her own mistake allows the child to work independently.

Montessori philosophy

Montessori education is based on the premise that children have an innate ability to learn and that when supported by an appropriate environment and educator, they are guided through their developmental needs to reach their full potential.

Casa dei Bambini employs Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) Montessori trained teachers, known as directors or directresses. Montessori teachers typically have a normal teacher qualification as well as an additional Montessori specific training. The teacher is a guide or facilitator whose task it is to support the young child in his or her process of self-development. They are foremost an



observer, unobtrusively yet carefully monitoring each child's development, recognising and interpreting each child's needs.

The teacher provides a link between the child and the prepared environment, introducing the child to each piece of equipment when he or she is ready in a precise, clear and enticing way. The most important attribute of a Montessori teacher is the love and respect she holds for each child's total being.

The Montessori assistant's role is to support the teacher and promote peace and order in the classroom. They value and respect the uniqueness of each child while consistently nurturing and modelling a love of learning. The assistant is a keen observer and is knowledgeable about developmentally appropriate behaviour and practices and supports the individual needs and interests of the children.

Montessori materials

The initial Montessori materials ones developed by Seguin for working with special needs children, were adapted by Montessori in the early 1900s. There is always the identifiable Pink Tower in the

classroom! The Pink Tower, for example, is not merely a tower of blocks of increasing size, but instead is a carefully calculated instrument to educate the senses and the motor system, and to implicitly introduce the decimal system and the notion of cubing. Each block is one centimetre longer on all sides than the one that came before, and there are ten such blocks going from one cubic centimetre to ten.

The increasing size is reflected not only visually but also haptically and barically: each block is heavier by an exponentially increasing magnitude. The child uses the Pink Tower in a specific way: carrying each cube to a rug, and then reassembling the tower from memory, from largest to smallest cube, carefully centering each subsequent cube over the preceding one.

The material is treated with great care; the teacher is to intervene when materials are handled roughly. When finished, the tower is admired then carefully dissembled and



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returned to its original location.

The Sandpaper Letters are cursive because Dr. Montessori saw it as easier for beginning writers to keep the pencil on the paper, flowing from one letter to the next, rather than stopping and beginning again for each new letter.

Not only does each material have many purposes, but there is also little redundancy across the materials, and redundancy is highly intentional where it exists: for example, there are many small knobs to assist development of the pincer grip because it is considered so important to develop. With Red Rods to exercise working memory, by having the child walk across the room to retrieve from a pile the rod just longer or shorter than the one just placed, one did not need the game of Memory in the classroom. In addition, each material was developed in the context of all the other materials.

The Solid Cylinders [or Solid Insets] set in motion thinking about changes in dimension, leading to the Pink Tower with three dimensions changing [three being easier to perceive than two], then the Brown Stair with two, then the Red Rods with just one. And the Red Rods would lead into math in the context of what came before (just mentioned) and after (Red and Blue Rods). Mastering the pencil with the Metal Insets set the child up for writing in the context of the child having also learned how to form the letters and knowing what they represent. This knowledge was conferred through use of the Sandpaper Letters.

The Metal Insets without that other supporting material would not lead to writing. And so on. By design the materials have this complex interweaving nature, so one material

feeds into or plays off of another. Dr. Montessori developed a specific set of materials to work together not only within the classroom, but also across classroom levels. The set within each classroom was intended to be about the right size set for a child to master in about three years in the classroom [or six years in Elementary for the full program].

And the materials the child would see in the next classroom not only referred to the materials in the earlier classroom [or was even the self-same material, used in a more complex way], but also required the understanding conferred by that earlier material. In sum, then, the original set of materials, comprised a specific set of materials for each classroom level, carefully designed to confer specific understandings through repeated use and in the context of other materials, selected to avoid most redundancy, and quantified to allow mastery in about three years in a classroom.

“To aid life...that is the basic task of the educator.”

Dr Maria Montessori

Traditional versus Montessori

In traditional education adults decide what children need to learn and the ability to retain and reproduce information is used as a measure of academic success. The teacher is the active giver of information and children are passive receivers.

In the Montessori approach it is all about the activity of the child. The teacher takes on a different role, that is, to provide the right kind of circumstances so that children can be guided to find what they need from what is on offer. Children then become active learners and are able to reach their own unique potential because they are learning at their own pace and rhythm focusing on their own particular developmental needs at that moment.



“A child sees through his hands.”

- Maria Montessori

The Montessori approach provides:

- An environment that serves the particular needs of each child’s stage of development
- An adult who understands child development and acts as a guide to help children find their own natural path
- Freedom for children to engage in their own development

according to their own particular developmental timeline. The habits and skills that a child develops in a Montessori class are good for a lifetime. They will help him to work more efficiently, to observe more carefully and to concentrate more effectively, no matter where he goes. If he is in a stimulating environment, whether at home or at school his self-education – which is the only real education – will continue. Montessori children are successful: they learn to be independent, self-motivated and self-controlled and to direct their own learning.

Montessori sustains children’s love of learning. There is an inner drive in every one of us, an inner voice that, if we listen to it, tells us which way to turn, which option to choose. If we allow children to listen to this voice, to follow their interests from birth, they are likely to learn a lot about themselves and their world as they grow. They will learn what they like and what they don’t like. They will come to know what they are good at, and how they are challenged. The focus that comes from doing what interests them will allow them to learn many things and become confident learners.

When learning is not overly prescribed, children love learning! They realise that the learning environment is one that support them and all of their needs and interests, rather than supporting the adults’ needs and interests. Children learn naturally, they are

To the normalised child, learning is a happy experience. If one is able to harness a child’s innate delight in discovery, to make use of a child’s self- motivation, there is no reason why this enthusiasm for school should fade. To recapitulate, normalised children have a love of order, a love of work, and profound spontaneous concentration; they are attached to reality, they have a love of silence and working alone, they have sublimated the possessive instinct, they are cheerfully obedient, and they possess independence and initiative. They are cooperative and mutually helpful. They possess self- discipline and joy. If the true purpose of a Montessori education is understood – if at home and at school children receive similar direction – this discipline will arrive.

For further information on CASA DEI BAMBINI, contact joanna@casadeibambini.com.hk and visit www.casadeibambini.com.hk

