



The Montessori Philosophy

1. The Montessori Approach to Education

As the American Montessori Society summarizes:

“A Montessori program is based on non-competitive and cooperative activities that help a child develop a strong self-image, high levels of academic and social competence, and the confidence to face challenges.”

“Encouraged to make decision at an early age, Montessori-educated children are problem-solvers who can make appropriate choices, manage their time, and work well with others. They exchange ideas and discuss work freely. These positive communication skills build the foundation for negotiating new settings.”

“Research has shown that the best predictor of future success is a positive sense of self-esteem. Montessori programs, based on self-directed, non-competitive activities, help children develop the confidence to face change with optimism.”

Dr. Maria Montessori was a physician, research scientist, and educator during the late 1800s-early 1900s who made observations about how children learn. The Montessori Philosophy of Education is based on Montessori’s observation that children have a natural desire to learn and that stages of development exist for which there should be corresponding educational environments and trained adults who prepare these environments. Children learn independently in a prepared environment with teachers who guide and serve as the links between the student and the educational environment of academic materials and lessons. By providing freedom of choice, this enriched learning environment cultivates individuals who learn to make independent decisions and to solve problems creatively. Students learn to develop healthy social relationships, to develop skills in concentration, and to master academic and life skills.

Over the years, the Montessori philosophy has evolved to challenge the whole child’s personality and intellect in a variety of multicultural and international settings. Dr. Montessori used her scientific observations of children to design functional learning environments created to support and enhance a child’s innate desire to learn about the world around him. Based on a strong integration of adult to child observation and practical hands-on activities, classroom materials offer learning experiences in a clear, concrete manner. Students use motor and intellectual discovery when working with these materials, with an emphasis on the sequential and orderly acquisition of both motor and cognitive skills. This ordered work method also allows for individualization and usually offers a three-year age span within the classroom,

enabling students to work and learn at their own pace, as well as in group settings. Montessori education is based on a three-year developmental and academic learning cycle.

The integration of varied age spans allows older students to gain confidence by working and role-modeling materials with younger students as well as reinforcing their own understanding of academic subjects. Collaborative learning and projects completed in groups encourage students to teach and learn with each other.

A well-prepared Montessori learning environment is given careful attention, allowing and encouraging the child accessibility to all materials she/he needs in performing and experiencing the step-by-step process of individual work. The classroom is thus arranged in a series of easily accessible shelves designed to accommodate specific work areas. This framework of organization gives accessibility to the necessary learning materials and frees the student to concentrate on the work, allowing an increase in independence and responsibility. This, in turn, decreases the need of direction from the teacher. As a result, children develop internal, rather than external, referencing. The teacher is also better able to observe the total classroom environment as well as the individual student. Each classroom at RMCS follows Montessori's concepts and is carefully designed to provide for the developmental needs of its students.

The Montessori classroom contains materials to support learning in the core subjects of language arts (reading and writing), mathematics, and geometry, while also providing materials in the areas of history, geography, and natural sciences (e.g. biology, astronomy, and chemistry). Each classroom contains materials that teach specific concepts for the particular age range. The materials are designed in a logical sequence of skill acquisition and concept building while reinforcing the development of abstract thinking. The learning materials initially isolate knowledge to one concept at a time in a concrete manipulative style. The child progresses toward an abstract, more divergent, level of evaluation and analysis, while also moving toward self-set, teacher-supported goals.

Through observation and record keeping, the Montessori teacher assesses the needs and level of each student to guide him or her towards a path to meet individual interests, maturity levels, capabilities, educational needs, and academic success. As a result of these observations, teachers can make adjustments in individual learning plans, both academically and behaviorally. Students work at their own speed and must demonstrate mastery of material before progressing.

2. The Prepared Environment

A Montessori classroom is strikingly different from a traditional classroom: there are no rows of desks. Colorful materials are neatly organized into clustered areas—like a science area with materials to conduct experiments, reference texts, binders labeled with student's names charting their individual progress through the curriculum and housing their science reports, and a terrarium. Desks are interspersed with open space where children work together on rugs, or cluster around a teacher sitting on the floor answering questions. Students are typically so actively engaged in their work that visitors are undisruptive and an atmosphere of quiet concentration prevails.

The Montessori classroom facilitates independent learning and exploration. The environment is designed to strike the imagination, to lead the student to abstraction, and to provide a system of information storage and retrieval. The Prepared Environment facilitates the child's exploration of the essential principles of all disciplines through sequenced order and aesthetic appeal.

Technology elements are integrated into classroom life. Children learn to use calculators, computers, and multimedia devices as part of their everyday experience. Throughout the curriculum, as appropriate, internet resources supplement research collected first-hand from resources found in the classroom and the community.

Montessori classrooms tend to fascinate both children and their parents. Typically, they are warm, bright, inviting, and filled with plants, animals, art, music, and books. There are curriculum centers with intriguing learning materials, such as three-dimensional mathematical models, colorful maps, botany charts, and collections of natural specimens. Each material stimulates curiosity and the five senses.

3. Multi-age Learning Communities

Montessori education places children in multi-age groupings. Children aged six to nine and nine to twelve, and thirteen and fourteen are placed in lower and upper elementary and junior high classes respectively. This multi-age grouping gives many advantages to learning, including the following:

- Children can progress through the curriculum at their own pace, guided by an individualized learning plan.
- The classroom serves accelerated students as well as remedial or English Language Learner students well because it is enriched with materials for an age-range, up to the level of challenging the interests of the most advanced students. It is acceptable and expected that students will excel in one area but may struggle with basic concepts in another. The three year curriculum gives each student space to grow at various levels while meeting end-criteria before moving forward.
- Younger students are constantly stimulated by the interesting work of older students.
- Older students serve as tutors and role-models, providing leadership experiences. Older students grow from helping younger students and reinforce their own knowledge by teaching others. They also learn to empathize with the needs of children who are younger than themselves, building important social and character skills.
- In a mixed-age class, teachers work with the same students for three years, forming an integral and close mentoring relationship.
- The class retains a high degree of continuity since the majority of students in each class returns the following year. This makes it easier to orient new children and individualize the ongoing curriculum for each student.

The multi-age classroom is a groundbreaking concept for developing community and supporting students of varying levels of academic and social development. By creating a bond between parents, teachers, and children, Dr. Montessori sought to create a closely-knit community where individuals could learn to be empowered; where children could learn to become contributing, sharing members of their school-family; where students could learn to care for younger children, learn from older people, and trust one another; and where children could find ways to be acceptably assertive rather than aggressive.

4. Individualized Learning

Montessori philosophy posits that for education to touch a child's heart and mind, the child must be learning because he/she is curious and interested. Montessori strives to make learning its own reward with each success fueling the desire to discover even more. To appeal to each child in this way, the curriculum is individualized according to the following principles:

- Individual learning styles, timetables, and capacities are respected. The child must develop herself; the adult acts as a resource and a catalyst for development.
- Students are given the opportunity to choose what to investigate and learn.
- The student is responsible for mastering basic skills and basic core knowledge. The student will follow a written study plan for each week, which is arrived at jointly by the teacher and the student.
- The student will be supported in planning an individual schedule for completing work.

Materials and activities are designed to support different learning styles and multiple intelligences, such as linguistic, spatial, musical, kinesthetic, and interpersonal. Some children – kinesthetic learners — learn best by using their hands, taking measure of materials physically and thereby mapping them mentally. Others — linguistic learners — are especially attentive to verbal cues and have innate ability to verbalize knowledge and to learn by listening attentively. Other children may benefit greatly from interacting with others, sharing, teaching, and collaborating to master the material; these are children with strong interpersonal learning skills. Montessori philosophy supports these differences and recognizes that children may also transition from one learning skill set to another as they develop during these formative years. One-size-fits-all teaching can fall short for these children.

5. Active Learning

Montessori materials are designed to stimulate the senses and engage students in active learning. Students are encouraged to pursue areas of particular interest to them, becoming “experts” (meaning the student is able to integrate this learning into his or her daily work and practice) and using all available resources, including internet and community sources to engage their curiosity.

The classrooms are prepared with Montessori-sourced materials, which are hands-on and encourage “experiential” learning, as opposed to the more traditional model of lecture and drill exercises, which are comparably passive. Repetition is accomplished by having a variety of materials with which to practice the same concept. It is this repetition — through active and multiple modes of learning — which leads to mastery of the concept.

Students learn by trial and error and by discovery. They learn to ask the right question, spontaneously engage in their own research, analyze what they have found, and draw their own conclusions. The extended work period, typically three hours, offers both the time and resources for investigation and experimentation, using the internet, classroom library, and related indoor and outdoor materials, as well as opportunities to pursue research outside the classroom, in a community garden, the local library or museum, or by contacting outside experts. Throughout this process of discovery, students are not afraid to take risks and to learn constructively from their mistakes.

Students engage with the Montessori materials, which are designed to transition children from concrete understanding in early elementary to abstract thinking. This means that children arrive at abstraction through their own creative process and their desire to understand. This is a joyful process of intellectual development, inner awareness, and creative thinking. Again, the child’s education is forged on the path to discovery.

Active learning is the heart of Montessori education. Rather than present children with the “right information” and supply the “right answers” up front in the form of lessons and lectures, Montessori

educators guide students to ask the “right questions” and help them discover the answers for themselves. With this active approach, learning becomes its own reward and each success fuels the desire to discover more.

6. Montessori Curriculum Materials

Credentialed Montessori teachers present core subjects using Montessori materials. Montessori materials have been shown to be an effective way of meeting California state standards and Common Core. In addition, materials are supplemented with books, experiences, technology and other instructional materials to support the child’s individual learning style. Supplemental materials to be added to the Montessori classroom are regularly reviewed staff. Dialogue continuously occurs between teachers and administration based on observation and assessment of individual student progress.

The integrated curriculum includes materials and activities for the development of understanding and skills in mathematics, geometry, natural sciences, physical sciences, technology, language arts (including phonics, spelling, grammar, sentence analysis, creative and expository writing), literature, geography, history, civics, economics, anthropology, sociology, practical life, movement, physical education, music, visual arts, and crafts.

Montessori materials are concrete representations of lessons, which guide the student to understanding a concept. Each Montessori material and lesson is specifically designed with a purpose, prerequisites, direct and indirect aims, typical age ranges, procedure, language, control of error, points of interest, variations and extensions, subsequent lessons, and its placement and importance in the entire curriculum. Teachers are trained in the selection, implementation, and outcomes of each material, thus solidly serving the student in his or her education. Materials are organized and presented sequentially, becoming more complex and abstract. Comprehension and mastery are required before student progresses to the next material. This allows the student to continue on a path of education that is uniquely individual, neither waiting for others to catch up, nor hindering others progress. It also provides constant placement of the student within the framework and assessment of individual student progress, as well as offers an immediate diagnostic capability should a student struggle with any material or concept.

Materials are presented in small and large group lessons designed to inspire the student and encourage the student’s thoughtful application of mastered materials and concepts. Typically, students progress through most group lessons with their yearly cohort, which incorporates a general pacing but allows for individual rates and movement to another group as necessary, similar to traditional educational system whereby a student would be “pulled out” for specific assistance, although the Montessori student remains in the classroom. In the Montessori Model, students find the specific support they need in a variety of lesson groups in the classroom, combined with the individualized attention of the trained teacher.

Of paramount importance are the Individual Learning Plans (ILPs), created at the beginning of each school year by the student in collaboration with the parent and teacher to determine a path of individual student success. The plans provide a process whereby strengths and areas of improvement are identified, goals are formulated, and specific learning objectives are agreed upon. In this way, the order and manner of learning new material is adjusted to the needs of each child as much as possible. The student’s progress toward fulfilling his or her ILP is the primary focus of subsequent conferences, progress reports, and student self-evaluations.

Each student, in collaboration with the teacher, also develops a Weekly Work Plan (WWP), setting forth the goals, expectations, and assignments for the week ahead. Weekly Work Plans address core subjects of language, mathematics, and science as well as, other areas of personal development. Whenever possible or appropriate, WWPs offer students the opportunity to propose an alternative assignment that would lead to the fundamental objective, but which would be more interesting to the student. Teachers review the WWP of each student on a weekly basis throughout the school year.

Appropriate measures are taken to respect the confidentiality of any student records protected under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. All records and assessments are available to parents and are sent to the student's new school in the case of the student transferring to another school.

7. Homework –The Montessori Way

The Montessori student often volunteers to continue research, do community service, and work on classroom related projects. Consequently, the Montessori student naturally develops good study skills, discipline, and responsibility. Continuing school-related projects at home also provides parents the opportunity to be involved in and stay current with their children's education. Daily homework, however, is not a part of a Montessori program. Nonetheless, if the student chooses, the teacher provides guidance for outside projects and activities based on the student's individual interests and needs. RMCS encourages daily reading individually and together, math fact practice, and cultivating a love of learning at home.

3880 Cypress Drive • Petaluma, CA 94954 • 707.778.6414 • www.rivermontessori.org

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