

The Work of the Child

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The Montessori Method can be discussed in terms of a dynamic triangle (Dorer, 2006). The three points are the prepared environment, the adult, and the child. The third point of the triangle entails the work of the child in the environment and in general how the child functions in the environment. There are several things the adult needs to know in order for the child to be able to function and work successfully in the environment.

It is easy for the adult's focus to be on the curriculum, worrying about whether a child knows how to read or knows her addition facts. But more important than this, the adult needs to focus on the child developing her independence. Children need to be able to function by themselves. They cannot always be dependent on us because we will not always be here. As adults we can aid a child in developing her independence by knowing when to leave a presentation and knowing when and when not to intervene. The child's independence is further developed by having the freedom of choice. This freedom will be discussed more in depth later. "Independence in the children is the empowering thing that allows them to go forward" (Dorer, 2006). In the environment, children develop independence in many forms, from independence to caring for one's self to working independently with material.

The absolute importance of the great work period is another thing the adult must be conscious of. Without this great work period, a child's ability to do work is limited. This great period should be an uninterrupted block of time from 2 ½ to 3 hours. During this time "extras" such as Spanish, computer, and dance should not be scheduled. The great period is a time for presentations and work. It is crucial to have this great period in order for children to be able to develop their concentration. Children, as well as adults,

are often able to better concentrate when the period of time in which they have to work is long. One is able to more deeply engage and concentrate on the work at hand if the time in which to work is long.

During this great period it is important to note that for a child receiving a presentation is not work; the two are separate. When we give a child a presentation, we are showing the child how to use the tools. Later the child will manipulate the tools. This is the work. The adult must be attuned to the time devoted to presentations and the time allotted for the child to work. If too much of the great period is taken up by presentations then the child obviously will be unable to have enough time for her own independent work.

Using the hands to engage the mind is another crucial part of the child's work in the environment. Regarding the development of a child's intelligence, Standing stated: We may put it like this: the child's intelligence can develop to a certain level without the help of his hand. But if it develops with his hand, then the level it reaches is higher, and the child's character is stronger (Standing, 1995, p. 152).

If the child's hands are not able to be engaged then the child's entire consciousness is not able to be engaged. If the hands are given work, the mind will be engaged. "Hands are the tools of the mind" (Dorer, 2006). Children are presented first with the concrete and only after working with their hands with the concrete is the abstract presented.

Freedom and choice are important to the work that a child does in the environment. Freedom as it occurs in the Montessori environment is often misunderstood. One common view is that the children have the freedom to do whatever

they please. The other view is that there is no freedom in the environment. The Montessori environment is seen as rigid, where the child must use the materials in the exact manner that the guide presented. No play or creativity is allowed. Neither of these views understands how freedom and discipline work together in the Montessori environment. Freedom is always paired with limits. The three freedoms which Montessori granted to the children in her first Children's House, and are still present in Children's Houses today, are the freedom to repeat, the freedom of movement, and the freedom of choice.

The need to repeat was the first freedom granted by Montessori to the children. A child may repeat her work and strive towards perfection. Standing relates the work, repetition, and perfection of a child when he states that a child:

Does not hurry as we do towards the end of the action, because for him the end of the

action is the action itself. His whole being is expressed in his work; he loves it, lives it, rejoices in it, preserves it, repeats it – *because it is the means by which he is perfecting himself* (Standing, 1998, p.145).

In the case of repetition, though a child has the freedom to repeat a work, she does not have the freedom to repeat a work in any manner she chooses. There are specific ways in which the materials may be handled and used.

The second freedom Montessori granted to the children was movement. She observed the children exhibited a need to move and found that this movement was necessary for their successful growth and development. Movement is built into all the Montessori materials. For example, in order to do the plant washing activity, a child first

gets and lays out an oil cloth on a table or chowkie. Then the child gets the plant washing tray, takes the materials off the tray, and returns the tray to the shelf. The child next brings a plant from somewhere in the environment to her work area. Lastly, the child takes the empty pitcher to the sink to fill it up with water in order to wash the plant. When the child is done washing the plant, all of this movement is repeated. Everything a child learns in the Montessori environment is associated with manipulating a particular material. To use the example of the red rods, the child is able to understand the concept of length and differences in length by handling the red rods. Montessori observed that when a child is able to move freely about the environment, the child, “instead of breaking everything, fighting or jumping around, is calm and serious about work” (Ramachandran, 1998, p. 87). Due to discipline, when given the freedom of movement, a child’s movements are not wild and unrestrained but controlled and exhibit analysis of movement.

The freedom of choice was the third freedom Montessori granted to the children. Montessori stated “free choice is one of the highest of all the mental processes” (Montessori, 1995, p. 271). The child is able to make choices about what work to do, where to do the work, and how many times to do this particular work. The child, however, may not choose a work which has not been presented to her and may not use the work in any manner she chooses. It is these three freedoms which allow children “the possibility to make full use of conditions to develop [their]selves and make [their] contribution” (Grant-Miller, 2007).

Next to be discussed is how the organization of the environment plays a role in the work of a child. The word organization in this context does not refer to the physical layout of the room, but how the children themselves are organized. In the Children's House the children are not organized into groups; they each work independently. In the E-1 environment the children are first organized into groups determined by their ages. Certain curriculum is presented to particular age groups of children. The curriculum is presented to all children in that age group regardless of whether or not we think each child is ready. Each child shows maturity and readiness in different ways, some more visible and readable than others. But regardless of our thoughts on the readiness of a child, she should receive that lesson. From lessons received, each child takes away something different. Children may also be grouped in secondary groups based on common interests

Record keeping is another part of classroom organization. E-1 and E-2 children keep notebooks of the work they do each day. Depending on the level of the student, different notebooks are used. A first year E-1 student for example keeps only two notebooks, one for math and one for everything else. A fourth year student will keep a separate notebook for each subject. These notebooks allow the child, teacher, and parent to see a child's progress in the classroom. The notebooks need not only be full of arithmetic or writing, embellishment is also important. Each page should be beautiful. Like the Celtic Book of Kells, important information should be intertwined with embellishments.

As discussed previously, the scheduling of the great period is important to allowing a child ample time to do work in the environment. Opening and closing rituals, and group time as well as recess are other aspects of scheduling in the classroom. Each is important to a child's day but none should interfere with the great period. Birthday celebrations are another important part to be scheduled into the day. To a child, her birthday is one of the highlights of her year. Though as adults we might not share this sort of enthusiasm for our own birthdays, we need to have enthusiasm for each child's special day.

The organization of curriculum is the last aspect pertaining to a child's work in the environment. It is important that the adult does weekly planning, deciding what presentations to give to which children on Monday, Tuesday, and so forth. This planning will allow no time to be wasted. The adult will be prepared as to what presentations to give and to whom and thus the children's time to work independently will be maximized. Weekly planning will also allow the adult to have records to look back on to see what presentations were given last week and last year.

The adult is responsible for planning and organizing so that the child is able to work. It is important to maintain a balance between adult planning and organizing and a child's freedom. We must have respect for the child and value her developing independence. Though we want to guide the child to develop skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, we must also guide the child to develop her whole being. Her education in a Montessori environment should be an aid to life. It is through purposeful work that a child is able to develop skills in reading, writing, arithmetic, and other

academic subjects as well as develop her entire being. The child has a need and drive to work, but this can only happen if the adult has created an environment in which the child is free to work.

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