

What is a Montessori Classroom?

By Ms. Melissa Eckes

As we begin our year, many of you have questions about what happens in the classroom and what your children do during the day. To help answer some of these questions, here is a brief introduction to the workings of a Montessori classroom.

There are different areas of a typical Montessori classroom: Practical Life, Sensorial, Math, Language, Geography/ Cultural and Science. In addition to these core areas, we have Art, Peace, Movement and, in P1 and P2, Spanish. All of these areas have a wealth of materials that are designed to develop concentration, coordination, independence and a sense of order as well as academics, emotional awareness and problem solving skills.

Practical Life is just that: an area that builds practical life skills that are used every day. Lessons range from skills such as folding or hanging clothes, sweeping a small area of the floor, cleaning spills and washing dishes. Children also learn basic care of the classroom tasks such as how to carry materials using both hands (coordination), moving through the classroom without spilling or dropping work (concentration), completing a task (independence), then returning the material to the proper location in the classroom so it is always in the same place (order).

Sensorial activities are designed to develop the 5 senses. Children practice carrying and sequencing materials which builds gross and fine motor skills, concentration and coordination and develops a sense of order. Many of the Sensorial materials have a series of 10 pieces, helping children understand the physical concepts of numbers without overt counting or an introduction to numbers.

Math activities cover a huge range of skills to help children understand order, sequencing, number recognition, skip counting concepts, addition and subtraction.

Montessori materials focus on introducing concrete, physical concepts first. These materials are meant to be picked up, carried, touched and felt to aid in understanding quantities. The second step in the Montessori math process is to introduce the symbol (which is more abstract). Then the two concepts of quantity and symbol are paired to achieve complete understanding.

Language consists of reading and writing skills. Reading activities are based on phonetics, meaning the sound a letter makes (not the name of the letter) is introduced first. We play games like I Spy to train children's ears to hear the first sound in a word ("d" in "dog"). From there, children learn to recognize ending and middle sounds, develop rhyming skills, and sequence pictures to learn concepts of 'first, then, last' as part of storytelling. Students are also introduced to the written symbols that go with the letters, practice sound sorting activities that pair an object with the corresponding beginning symbol ("mop" begins with "mmmmm" and the letter "m" makes the "mmmmm" sound) and begin to build words with the moveable alphabet.

Writing activities actually begin with Practical Life and Sensorial activities where children use a three finger grasp to lift, carry and transfer a variety of materials. All these activities have been practiced using a left to right motion to help train the child's eye and hand for writing! When they are ready to hold a pencil, they begin simple writing activities such as tracing shapes, tracing their name and, eventually, tracing letters and numbers. The next step is to begin writing single letters and numbers independently and build up to words, then simple sentences.

In P1 and P2, students begin learning basic **Spanish** skills by listening to their Spanish speaking teachers using basic, simple, repetitive language (Good morning, how are you, my name is, etc.) Concepts of daily activities such as "wash your hands", "eat snack" or lunch, "drink water" are heard every day in the context of the classroom to help students function effectively in Spanish. Students have the opportunity to practice vocabulary, syllables, colors, numbers, counting and reading using specific Spanish materials but also learn to say the names of common everyday objects in both English and Spanish by utilizing all the materials in the classroom.

The **Science and Geography/Cultural** areas introduce concepts of our world and the people, plants, animals and places within it. Students learn to differentiate between vertebrates and invertebrates as well as placing animals into classifications of mammal, reptile, fish, amphibian, bird or insect. Each continent of the world is touched upon to help students understand that our world is filled with many different people, animals and plants.

The **Peace** area is designed to help children understand their own feelings and give voice to them. Once they are able to identify their own emotions, they can begin to understand that others have those same feelings. Identifying and talking about feelings helps children learn to manage their emotions, and this, in turn, leads to problem solving skills.

Each month, our newsletter will cover a different aspect of Montessori education and how the children are growing and learning within their classrooms. We hope you enjoy it!