

# Montessori in a Nutshell

*letter to a new classroom assistant*

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There are a number of interrelated strands which shape a child's experience in Montessori education. Let's consider two:

- the cognitive, social, and spiritual growth of the individual child,
- children's experiences and understanding within community, relating to the idea of "cosmic education" as expressed in the elementary cultural curriculum and to the adolescent community

Regarding the individual development of the child, one must keep in mind Dr. Montessori's belief in the need for every learner to grow at his or her own pace, and in ways which best meet the needs and strengths of each student. This would seem to be common sense, but a cursory look at many traditional learning environments reveals a sequence tied directly to timed schedules of delivery. As Montessori teachers, we can operate within generalized understandings about children's growth. But... and always remember, Montessori philosophy requires us to find the developmental path on which each child walks, and then to walk that path along with the child. The seeming paradox is that in order to guide a child, we must *always* seek to follow the child.

Key to Montessori practice is the creation of a prepared environment with which the children interact. Classrooms are designed to meet children's physical size with a correspondingly sized physical structure. Materials are provided which present concepts in concrete, sensorial terms, and the child is given latitude in both choice and independent action when interacting with these materials. The need for this is shown in Montessori's statement that young children acquire physical independence by being self-sufficient. They grow into independent will by freely using the power of choice, and they develop independent thought by working without interruption.

In the prepared environment, children interact with materials which range from the practice of practical life skills to the development of ideas in language, mathematics, and the sciences. The materials are organized around a general pattern, moving from the concrete representation of a concept, to the attainment of an abstract understanding by the child. Early materials present concrete, manipulative opportunities for learners to explore the inner workings of an idea. Successive materials become increasingly abstract, until finally a student moves into a free and actualized understanding. This is seen particularly in the mathematic materials, though the pattern of moving from the concrete to abstraction is seen in other applications as well.

Montessori environments develop and change with the age of the child, each prepared with an understanding of the growing child's needs and potentialities. The materials

provide their own motivation for growth, while opportunities for cooperative action between students deepen with the children's experience and age.

Montessori wrote of the child moving through a second gestation of sorts, occurring now in the outside world, where a young child's latent seeds of personality incarnate into a mature, social being. Montessori saw this as an individual constructive process and knew that an educational environment must be designed in every way to aid that growth.

At the same time, Montessori also knew that for humanity to thrive, young people must be led toward a conscious vision of peaceful, productive coexistence. If humanity is to work toward common goals, she believed, then children must be educated to seek common goals. In this light, Montessori saw but one purpose for education: to better society by allowing for children's individual independence, while at the same time preparing them for participation in a truly social life.

The Elementary "cultural curriculum" broadly encompasses our planet's physical and biologic development, the development of humanity, and earth's early civilizations. Activities in these areas serve as a vehicle for learned ideas and skills through research and experimentation. Studies in the cultural curriculum offer students opportunities for interaction in imaginative and inventive work. Group activities allow children to step into leadership roles, to experience the value of a role in support of leadership, and to find in both the satisfaction of cooperative action.

More importantly, however, the Elementary cultural curriculum is also key in helping children to understand the interdependent nature of the world, and to finding their own places in the world around them. Vital to the unfolding of the cultural curriculum is Montessori's vision of "cosmic education", a system of thought which seeks to "give the child a vision of the whole universe, for all things are part of the universe, and are connected with each other to form one whole unity."

Within this broad vision, interdependent structures are examined for the "cosmic task" of each to their individual elements. Whether a given structure is in the biologic, geologic, or social realm, its component strands each play a vital role in supporting the structure as a whole. That role is known as that element's cosmic task.

In Lower Elementary, the structures examined have to do with planetary creation and the biologic development of life on earth. Particular emphasis is given to the period from 650 million years ago through the development of early humans. Ideas such as interrelatedness, symbiosis, and mutual interdependence are kept at the fore as the development of our planet and its life are explored.

In Upper Elementary, the cultural curriculum focuses more on ancient civilizations, and the specializations within community life which allowed for the growth of the arts, government, religion and agriculture. Here, the idea of the cosmic task is

considered in relation to the mutually interdependent roles held by individuals within society.

All of this leads into Montessori's vision for adolescent education. The goal at this level is not simply to help students find and develop their independence. Rather, it is to provide opportunities for them to use their independence in ways which help them enter into real and productive social life. Montessori's thinking here is about rooting the expansion of adolescence into experiences which are forward moving and community oriented. At the adolescent level, we seek to help young people enter society not simply with skills for self-support, but with the experience and knowledge required for self-sufficiency. Toward this end, Montessori writes of an educational environment which appeals to the developmental needs, and to the capacities of adolescents as they prepare to interact in larger and more significant ways with the society around them.

One can easily make connections between these ideas and the overall cultural curriculum of the elementary grades. There, emphasis is given to the ideal of the cosmic task, revealing how seemingly simple things aid one another in systems of support, leading to expanding structures. In her writings on adolescent education, Montessori continues to speak of cosmic tasks, but not in relation to the planet, nature or early civilizations. In her thinking on adolescent education, Montessori gathers the elementary program's ideas of interdependent support, and reflects them onto the economic, civic and relational roles each of us plays as we interact with society.