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MONTESSORI LEADERSHIP

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PREPARED
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3RD FLOOR
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FLOOR PLAN

Scale





THE THIRD FACTOR IN EDUCATION: *The Prepared Environment*

by Punum Bhatia, Ph.D.

“From this we can see that the special circumstances surrounding the children were a suitable environment, a humble teacher, and material objects adapted to their needs.” (Montessori, 1966, p. 137)

At the turn of the 20th century, Montessori discovered a revolutionary way of directing young children’s learning; in contrast to the teacher-centered approach prevalent at the time. She realized that children learned more effectively if adults provided them with a ‘prepared environment’ that gave them a sense of equality and empowerment. She describes this environment as a place where the child was nurtured, for its design meets his needs for self-construction and helps him reveal his personality and growth patterns to us. In the calm, ordered space of the Montessori ‘prepared environment,’ children work on activities of their own choosing and at their own pace. They experience a blend

of freedom and self-discipline in a place specially designed to meet their developmental needs.

Montessori classrooms are “usually a large, open-feeling space, with low shelves, different sizes of tables that comfortably seat one to four children, and chairs that are appropriately sized for the children in the classroom” (Lillard, 2005, p. 18). A collection of materials (apparatus) is displayed on the shelves, with everything carefully ordered and in its place. The materials entice the child because they are placed in the center of his vision, are within easy reach, and because they have a sensory appeal, varying in color, shape, size, texture, and possibilities of manipulation. The array of sensory contrasts, however, suggests purposeful variation rather than a random placement of brightly colored objects.

The apparatus helps children learn basic concepts and relationships at different levels of abstraction by ensuring that the

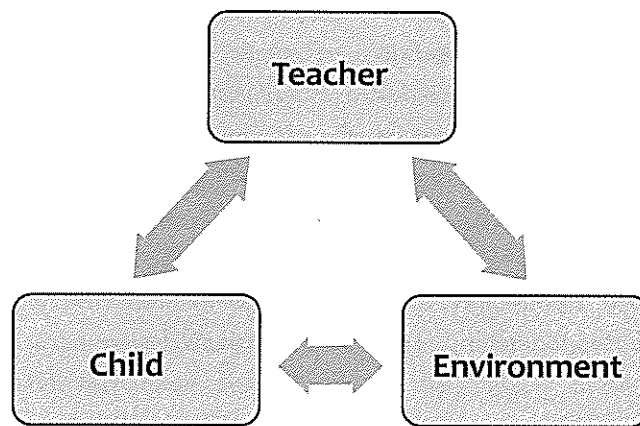
activities are based on physical manipulation of objects and progress through imagery to symbolic representation. The adults in the classroom unobtrusively demonstrate the use of the materials and then leave the child to work with them, intervening as needed. Not every material needs a formal presentation. For example, a well-timed presentation on Constructive Triangle Box 1 with the guidelines clearly explained and demonstrated that all black lines meet, leads the child to explore and discover on his own the remaining four boxes. Demonstrating each of the boxes before inviting the child to work with it would take away the child's joy of discovery learning.

Montessori saw life in the classroom as interplay between the child, the environment, and the teacher. E. M. Standing calls the 'prepared environment' "the third factor in education" (1957, p.266). In traditional schools, the teacher attempts to impart knowledge to the children through her resources and expects them to learn from her, usually in a group situation. Since the learning is undertaken mainly in the abstract and the amount of repetition is not under the students' control, such a system limits how much children learn and at what age the learning should occur. In the Montessori classroom though, this 'third factor' alters the dynamic between student and teacher. The child is free to act on his own impulses and to

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In the set up of the classroom, the Montessori teacher ensures that the classroom has large open spaces where all areas of the room are visible and accessible to the children. Not only is this an invitation to the child to work, but the child is also drawn to the materials by watching older children work with them. Every piece of material on the shelf is complete and clean. It invites the child to work with its simplicity, perfection, color-coding and control of error. There are pouches made of silk that entice the child. The aprons are color coded to specific exercises, whether it is flower arranging, mirror polishing, or apple slicing. The teacher has added personal touches that make the work even more appealing. They call the child to work. Children are absorbed in using these objects, selecting them from the shelves, taking them to a mat or small table, and working with them unrestrictedly before returning them to the shelf.

repeat activities until he has exhausted his interest. Instead of the power of the adult's persona controlling the child's natural flow, her energy is turned toward the environment. Standing illustrates this flow of activity in the following diagram:



"But in our specially prepared environments we see them all at once fix themselves upon some task, and then their excited fantasies and their restless movements disappear altogether; a calm, serene child, attached to reality, begins to work out his elevation through work. Normalization has been achieved." (Montessori, 1966, p.162)

The child learns mainly through the environment, while the teacher maintains the environment and supervises the children. In this way, each child learns independently and at his/her own pace. Standing describes the Montessori teacher as "a combination of a guardian angel with an information bureau" (1957, p.318).

Children soon realize that this classroom truly belongs to them, and they accept responsibility for the order, care and maintenance of their prepared environment. The spontaneous creation of a community of children is one of the most remarkable outcomes of the Montessori approach. This development is aided by the sense of ownership and responsibility the children feel towards the prepared environment. It is their classroom, and the children maintain daily order by returning the materials, washing and polishing tables and chairs, and caring for plants and animals. They have a responsibility towards each other as well – their concern and empathy is apparent when a child misplaces the smallest pink cube and everyone pitches in to help find it. Life in the community is also enhanced by the presence of children of different ages, just like real life. This community promotes mutual respect, shared responsibility, collaboration and friendship.

“What Montessori has done is this: realizing the peculiarly absorbent nature of the child’s mind, she has prepared for him a special environment; and, then, placing the child within it, has given him freedom to live in it, absorbing what he finds there.” (Standing, 1957, p. 265) ■

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About Punum Bhatia, PhD

Inspired by Dr. Maria Montessori’s philosophy, Punum Bhatia, PhD has dedicated her life to Montessori education as a parent, teacher, and teacher educator for nearly thirty years. She completed her Bachelor’s degree in English Literature; earned Masters’ degrees in English Literature and Education from the University of Calcutta; and completed a certificate diploma in Montessori Pedagogy. She earned her Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Colorado (Denver) in 2012 for her work on the Self-Efficacy of Montessori teachers. In her efforts to understand children and the environments necessary for them to grow and flourish, Punum focuses on Maria Montessori’s original philosophy and techniques. After teaching the Montessori Method to cohorts all around the world, she is now the proud owner of her very own bilingual preschool. (www.mcidenver.edu)



...inspiring today’s learners to become tomorrow’s leaders.

CONGRATULATIONS to Sun Grove Montessori, Ft. Pierce, FL on earning their IMC accreditation.

In March, 2016, the onsite team of Kathy Leitch (IMC Accreditation co-chair), Hillary Drinkell (former IMC Accreditation Director) and Robin Howe (Associate Head of NewGate School) drove across the state of Florida to do the onsite visit for Sun Grove Montessori School.

Sun Grove is a non profit corporation that was established in 1978. The school’s programs include Infant/Toddler through Middle School.

Sun Grove is the second school in the state of Florida to earn IMC accreditation.

Interim Head of School Terri Zuidema described the process this way: “... completing the Montessori Foundation course *Building a World Class Montessori School* and the personal support offered by the IMC team members through the process was key to our success.” Terri will represent the school at the 2016 20th Annual Montessori Foundation Conference in Sarasota, Florida, November 3-6 to address the attendees on what it means to have earned school accreditation.

If you would like more information on the IMC’s School Accreditation program and what earning accreditation can do for your school, please email lornamcgrath@montessori.org.

