

Comparison of Educational Philosophy

As a Montessori teacher who is very active in the educational sector, one question I often get from fellow teachers is “What is Montessori education and what makes it different to mainstream education?” With the answer being so immense, it is often hard to wrap up in several sentences or a sweeping statement. But there are fundamental differences between the two philosophies that are very digestible, and today we will discuss those differences and the impacts they have on today’s education of young children.

The first and most fundamental difference between the two education platforms is that the Montessori methodology is based around what Maria Montessori called ‘the prepared environment.’ The prepared environment is one which is designed to be attractive and tangible, to allow children to flourish as whole children. Montessori argues that, “If we want the school to become a laboratory for the observation of human life, we must gather within it things of natural beauty.” (1991: 114)

A carefully prepared environment encourages independence, free will and responsibility. It is carefully prepared by the teacher based on observations of the children. To a certain extent, mainstream classrooms also have a prepared environment, but the fundamental difference is that within the Montessori setting, children are free to choose activities as they wish and with whom they wish to work. The environment within a Montessori classroom will look very different to that of a mainstream room. Montessori rooms are filled with tactile materials that allow for almost unlimited exploration and experimentation. A good mainstream teacher will also have several investigatory activities around the room, but the distinct difference is that children in the Montessori environment are free to choose which subject they will work on and when. A good example of this is within a Montessori classroom where we may see a child using the decimal checkerboard. Almost automatically, children will try to extend themselves using three or four decimal placed numbers, but within a mainstream classroom we often see that extension activities may only consist of a shelf with extra worksheets, labelled ‘fast finishers.’ Because of the lack of educational materials in a mainstream classroom, differentiated activities can be very laborious for the teacher to organise.

Having the environment prepared in such a way, Montessori children are encouraged to be active, not passive. Teachers of Montessori children are trained to inspire the children and ignite the flames of inquiry. A lesson in a Montessori class will usually involve a small group of children manipulating something: a plant, an eyeball, a map or a timeline. Something many teachers can only dream of in a mainstream room. The Montessori materials work alongside the teacher to allow the children to discover findings for themselves. “It is passion for knowledge rather than attention which now animates our young people.” Montessori (1965: 128)

Generally speaking, in the mainstream sector we see large groups of children listening to the teacher feed them information and subsequently being tested on these facts. With the influence of standardised testing and national rankings, we see that mainstream schools are putting more emphasis on 'the facts' whereas Montessori placed her assessments on the discoveries of the child. There are occasions within a mainstream classroom where teachers have the ability to work with small groups, such as guided reading sessions, but the reliance that the children have upon the teacher makes these sessions, once again, few and far between.

As we know, timetabling is a huge part of the mainstream education environment. Subjects are timetabled accordingly to match the requirements set out by the government. Whilst this is perfect when the school is asked for accountability towards subject time allocation by the government, Montessori saw these time constraints a huge problem when considering the learning potential of the child. In a Montessori classroom, children are encouraged to work on a project for as long as **they required**. Interrupting them would be a crime. This allows for deep understanding and discovery. It does, however, have its setbacks. It forces the teacher to be extra vigilant on record keeping, as a Montessori teacher must know exactly where each child is on their timeline of education. Each child must be closely monitored so that no subjects are left out. The lack of timetabling also proves difficult for Montessori schools to prove their time allocation easily when required by the authorities. Ultimately, with a good teacher in the room and a deep understanding of the Montessori philosophy and pedagogy, a child who is allowed to focus on an activity for longer will end up with a deeper understanding.

The role of the teacher is very different in the Montessori environment compared to that of a mainstream classroom. Traditionally, lesson times and structures are predetermined in mainstream classes. Groups of children as large as 30 are taught at the same time under strict time constraints. On the contrary, in Montessori classrooms, the children have an instilled sense of freedom and responsibility. With Montessori classrooms designed vertically, a teacher can give small differentiated lessons to groups or an individual. For example, a lesson on angle construction in a mainstream room may involve a whole class demonstration on a big board, where it is very hard for the children to see the intricate workings of the protractor or the compass. In the Montessori environment, teachers are able to sit with a small group, allowing the child to come to a deeper understanding of the concept.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, Montessori rooms are designed vertically, which means a typical class can contain up to three different grades. A cycle 3 class may contain 9, 10, 11 and 12 year olds and is determined by their developmental progress. This is very different to a mainstream class, which will only accommodate one grade at a time. The implications here are enormous. The Montessori child will

automatically have good role models, will develop a sense of responsibility to younger peers as he/she moves up within the hierarchy, and will rely less on the teacher as he/she understands that their peers can be just as beneficial. Mainstream schools also have these factors in place in the classrooms. Teachers will allocate jobs for students who they deem responsible enough for the role, groups may have leaders, and specific areas of the room may have monitors. The fundamental difference between the two is that within the Montessori environment, these roles develop organically without the teacher's influence and this has huge implications for future developments and responsibilities.

Montessorians believe that the rewards for producing a piece of work are the ones felt by the child internally; the sense of pride a child feels for their achievements or new discoveries. It is natural that children want to impress their teacher, but in a Montessori classroom, questions from children such, "Do you like my work, Gavin?" are met with responses that ask the child what he/she thinks of their own accomplishments. Putting the emphasis on the child allows them to think about why they produced the work in the first place. As Eissler says, "She created an environment in which the children received positive and negative feedback from the daily interactions with classmates, the materials and the self-guided trial and error process." (2009: 104)

Work is not produced to receive praise from the teacher, a tick, a positive comment or a gold star. For a Montessori child, it is for the feeling of self-accomplishment and pride, which later develops into an understanding of the big picture and the impacts of our actions on the world around us. Although this philosophy is starting to change in mainstream classrooms, with an influx of project-based learning in mainstream education, it is still very common for children to receive stickers, stars, scores and charts for work they have submitted. This forces the child to have a sense of reliance on the teacher and ultimately takes away the responsibility to one's self.

A dynamic mainstream teacher can be an inspiration to the children in their class. They can lead the children on the path to discovery; they can be the bridge between the child and knowledge. There is no doubt about that, but mainstream education is still somewhat restrictive compared to Montessori methods. It is designed to meet the needs of the main bulk of the class whilst expecting the teacher to differentiate lessons and planning to cater for the extremities of the class; the children with educational needs, be it gifted or not. It proves difficult for teachers to keep reinventing the wheel, to keep thinking of new ways for learning to be fun whilst tailoring to the needs of the class. This is why we see a huge amount of teachers walking away from the profession with stress. The efforts are too large to take on. Montessori stated that, "The child loves everything that he learns, for his mental and emotional growth are linked. Whatever is presented to him must be made beautiful and clear, striking his imagination. Once this love has been kindled, all problems confronting the educationist will disappear." (1989: 17)

Montessori education is designed so that the teacher is the bridge between the child and knowledge that follows. That bridge is the materials. Once the teacher explains how the materials are used, the child will be allowed to choose them at will to set sail on the seas of discovery. The teacher will be the wind that gently guides the child on this discovery. The materials allow for lessons to be differentiated easily and the fact that they are beautiful and tactile makes them enjoyable. Children want to use them; they want to discover what they have to offer. The prepared environment, the materials and the role of the teacher are the fundamental differences that make Montessori education a hot topic on the lips of anyone in the educational sector at the moment. The more we can integrate Dr. Montessori's philosophy into the mainstream education sector, the better.

In conclusion, we can see that there are differences between the two pedagogies and each have their implications on young children today. We all learn through our sensorial pathways; sight, smell, sound, emotion, touch and taste, and it seems that because of the prepared environment and the carefully designed materials, Montessori has more to offer the child in this department. Learning seems easier and less predetermined in Montessori classrooms. On the other hand, mainstream education allows teachers to meet the government's time allocations more easily and requires less strenuous training. In order to be a Montessori teacher, you must understand with great clarity all the materials required for the classroom, and this takes time, practice and a lot of money. So, in order to answer my initial question of 'What is Montessori education, and what makes it different to mainstream education?', the important thing to remember is that it is different. It's different in its origin, its delivery and its results, but Montessori's theory is based on producing children of the world, children who can make changes for the better, children who understand the consequences of their actions. And, in today's world, I believe that now, more than ever, we need children with these strong morals as the leaders of tomorrow.

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