

Repetition and Choice in the Classroom

In this paper we will discuss the importance of choice in the learning environment, the importance of purposeful play, and why repetition is crucial in the prepared environment.

Purposeful play is a wonderful subject to discuss and observe. It is an aspect of Maria Montessori's work that is linked highly to the cognitive ability of the child and the constant development of the child through their primary years.

Purposeful play can be one of the most creative times of the day. To observe such a spectacle is mesmerizing and gives adults a window of opportunity into the creative mind of the individual. It is a time when we can see a child's true creativity, as they combine their experiences, interests and memories to create something unimaginable to the outside world.

Montessori spoke of times she had observed children in classrooms filled with expensive toys. She spent hours trying to inspire them to play with these toys but each time, the children became restless and left feeling uninspired.

Montessori likened this kind of forced play to a business man trying to play a game of chess. 'These are pleasant occupations for hours of leisure, but they would become painful if we were obliged to pursue them.' Montessori (1966: 122) From this we can deduce that it is highly meaningful to allow children to pursue purposeful play, but it must be on the terms of the child. If forced by the director, the child will become restless and this will stifle their ability to achieve mastery or tap into their state of real creativity.

In the early days of Montessori's research, she spent hours observing children in the natural and prepared environments. She looked for patterns and behaviours that would assist her in developing an educational platform that could enhance the learning experience for all. From her first days in the presence of children, she noticed that they were not only inquisitive, but saw the world in a way that many researchers hadn't noticed. The children saw order in the world, they saw systems, relationships, and with their inquisitive minds they would be more than willing to rectify the order if it was, for some reason, disrupted.

Montessori observed a teacher who, on entering the classroom, dropped her teaching materials. They were coloured beads of many shades. The teacher in question was extremely embarrassed and as this action startled the class, it also led Maria to discover something that would revolutionize the way educators would see their prepared environments. Almost automatically, the children gathered around the teacher and began collecting the beads, ordering them

and arranging them by colour and shade. From this we can conclude that children are indeed inquisitive and although they were not asked to help the teacher, they chose to. This freedom to choose enabled Montessori to establish rules that would shape the way we prepare our classroom environments.

Freedom of choice is a great responsibility that must be managed by the classroom teacher. There must always be boundaries and 'non-negotiables' which allow children to make choices but within certain parameters. From her early observations, Montessori realised that children who were given such freedoms would become accustomed to selecting the same materials each day. This repetition allowed children to master a particular skill or concept but also allowed the children to avoid certain materials and activities.

The avoidance tactics used by children can be a signal of many things to the classroom teacher. Amongst other things, the child may find the subject to which the materials relate to as uninspiring. The child may find the concepts which surround this subject too difficult or the display of the materials in the environment may not be attractive to the child. The job of the classroom director, amongst other things, is to make sure that the curriculum is delivered effectively with adherence to the time allocation requirements set by the state. It is important that the director first observes and records which materials the child is avoiding and which materials the child is frequently using. From these observations there are many tactics the director can deploy in order to inspire a wider range of choice within the classroom.

Discussions around time management or prioritising may need to take place with certain children or groups. Perhaps the prepared environment may need to be rearranged or revamped in order to inspire children to want to use the materials, or perhaps the presentations which are being delivered are not inspirational enough to entice the children to want to explore the concepts in more depth. It is also a possibility that the children did not understand the concept, or were confused by the way the materials were presented. Montessori said that 'Interest and concentration arise specifically from the elimination of what is confusing or superfluous.' (1968: 122) It is through a teacher's self-reflection and careful observation of the child that we as teachers can refine our practice and the environment, to make sure that students are reaching their full potential in all areas of the curriculum.

It is also important to mention that there are certain elements of the curriculum that children may wish to repeat over and over. It is this repetition that will

eventually allow the child to achieve mastery in the chosen area. This concentration and dedication allows the children to truly engage with the concept and the materials. Through the repeated task, a child allows himself to make mistakes and therefore set himself problems which must be solved. Only through repetition and experimentation will the child be able to solve the problem and thus, make way for internal development. This repetition should be encouraged and carefully observed but, as mentioned above, it must have its limitations alongside the non-negotiables.

It is crucial that presentations of materials demonstrate the order in which materials are to be used. For example, the decimal checkerboard is used in a particular order. This order allows the successful use of this material which results in a particular calculation being correct. Eissler. T (2009: 158) states that “Students are most often eager to follow the teacher’s demonstrations to the letter and will continue to do so over time.” And it is this repetition of technique that children are encouraged to practice and perfect, as it gives the children a sense of self-worth and achievement. It allows them to succeed in a given task. Whether it be the practical life exercise of washing the table or the trinomial cube, the effect will be the same.

From Montessori’s research we can see that yes, purposeful play is an important part of a child’s educational journey, but it must be initiated by the child. Repetition is just as important, as it allows mastery and delivers a sense of achievement and challenge to the child, without being praised or guided by others. These aspects of the educational journey can only succeed if we allow the child to have a sense of responsibility and with that responsibility comes the freedom to choose. To make sensible choices within the boundaries of the classroom. Through this we not only develop children who are prepared for the real world, but we develop children who have a sense of self-worth, self-correction and creativity.

References

Eissler. T. (2009) Montessori Madness. Georgetown: Sevenoff LLC

Montessori.M. (1965) Spontaneous Activity in Education. New York: Schocken Books Inc

Montessori.M. (1966) The Secret of Childhood. New York: Ballantine Books

