

## Why do Mixed Aged Classrooms Function Better?

In this paper we will compare Montessori's 'vertical' age groups with traditional age grouping and the different opportunities to establish good social habits, respect, and positive relationships. We will discuss the advantages of a child completing the final year in a 9-12 cycle and understand the importance of this transition.

It is common knowledge that mainstream classrooms are very different from the environments established by many Montessori teachers. One distinct difference between these two systems is that the mainstream classroom caters for one year group at a time, whereas a Montessori classroom will see a mixed or *vertical* group of children spanning across three years. The implications for this are many, but today we will discuss how the vertical classroom assists the child both socially and emotionally, focusing specifically on the cycle 3 environment.

Maria Montessori stated that '*Segregation by age as in traditional schools breaks the bonds of social life, deprives it of nourishment*' (1988: 225) and it is this statement that sets the basis for this paper.

The journey through school for most children can be sometimes difficult to say the least. There are many pressures at work on the social and emotional stability of the child as they navigate through the minefield of self-discovery and the exploration of the world. Montessori understood this and developed a system that would allow for that pressure to be eased, not by the teacher, but by the students themselves.

As a child travels through the planes of development towards maturity, they leave behind the egocentric view of the world and start to develop the ability to see the world from another's perspective. They understand that they too can be leaders, they feel empowered and responsible, but with that responsibility comes a great deal of power and respect. But how do these factors allow Montessori children to excel both socially and emotionally?

Mainstream classrooms tend to put the teacher on a pedestal at the front of the room, dictating information to 30 or so children of the same age. The teacher informs the children on what subject they will be studying, worksheets are distributed, facts are relayed and copied, then revised and tested. Each child is fed the same information and differentiation is usually implemented through outcomes. The chance for leadership, responsibility and intuition is usually directed by the teacher. The table monitor, the class helper, the messenger, all selected by the teacher depending on how the teacher views the child. This lack of ownership over responsibilities within a working day are something that you will not see in a Montessori classroom and this is down to the genius of the three-year cycle implemented by Maria Montessori.

Firstly, it is important to understand that children need good role models around them as they mature. If we want children to walk, not run in the classroom, then we as teachers should walk. If we want them to talk quietly, then we as teachers should talk quietly. This is common in most classrooms, no matter what the methodology, but what if it was the children, not the teacher who was the role model. We have all heard a teacher tell students, "*You are the oldest in the school and you should be setting the example!*" In the Montessori environment, Grace and courtesy are encouraged from the moment the child enters the school, and this means the children set the example from a very early age.

Having three grades in the same room allows for younger children to look towards the elder children as the example. Similarly, it allows the older children to develop leadership skills

and intervene naturally. As part of a child's development in cycle 3, we often see 11-12 year olds take ownership of the classroom automatically. They develop a sense of responsibility in the room and respect from their younger peers.

Because the teacher is not set up as the oracle in the room, the younger children will not only look towards the teacher for guidance, but also towards the older children, who themselves have had good role models and the cycle continues. Leadership opportunities are not orchestrated by the teacher but manifest themselves spontaneously. Montessori understood that children in cycle 2 and 3 needed to have freedom and responsibility. Not just a responsibility to themselves but to the others around them. With this newfound power, they understand that they can make a difference and that difference usually starts in the classroom and escalates into the wider environment as they mature and grow.

In a Montessori school, we see that the efforts of the cycle 1 directors to establish a simple understanding of respect for one's environment and the others around them, has profound effects on the child as they move through to cycle 3. Simple tasks such as cleaning your plate after eating a snack and putting it away in the correct place, which are implemented during practical life activities in cycle 1, will have huge impacts on the child as they move towards the end of cycle 3. They now feel a sense of respect and responsibility for the places in which they live and learn. This can lead to wonderful projects such as fund raisers, cleaning local parks, raising money for the needy or changes to the room to improve the efficiency of the learning environment, all suggested and implemented by the children.

It is these examples that have lasting effects on the younger peers who see them occurring. They too feel empowered. It is rare that in a Montessori school we see such things as bullying. This is because of the social justice enforced by the children; they lead by example and tackle injustice with calm and careful resolve. The younger children have 3 years to watch and learn from the leaders above them and this is something that would not happen in a mainstream classroom.

Maria Montessori was an advocate for world peace. She wanted to provide an education system that would produce children who were aware of the consequences of their actions, who believed that they had the power to make a difference. She wanted to make the world a better place. Having a sense of morality is important, but equally as important is the development of collaboration and leadership. ‘

A stereotypical mainstream classroom usually has students sitting in designated seats, working individually or in pairs. Teachers don't have too many opportunities to allow leadership roles and collaboration organically. Activities such as guided reading allow children to work in differentiated groups and take charge of the tasks in hand, but these opportunities are few and far between. This can affect the way that children in traditional school develop socially as Lillard indicates, ‘*Social life consists of sitting side by side and hearing someone else talk, but that is just the opposite. The only social life that children get in ordinary schools is during playtime or on excursions. Ours live always in an active community*’ (1972: 56)

Within Montessori's vertical classroom, focusing on cycle 3, we see this exposure to leadership take place on a daily, if not hourly basis. Children in the younger years often seek advice from older peers on subjects they need revision on. Tasks such as the decimal checkerboard or long multiplication can be delivered by the older students. This sense of collaboration is almost automated in a Montessori classroom. Presentations can be attended by anyone in the room. Montessori argues that ‘*One can always go for an intellectual walk!...a child of six may comprehend a little of what a nine year old is doing and may stay to watch, learning something from it.*’ (1988: 207)

Similarly, if a lesson on *the functions of the human heart* is being delivered to a group of 11 year olds and a younger student decides to attend and work alongside the older peers, then this is encouraged. The older children automatically take a leadership role, modelling good behavior, a high standard of work and a sense of maturity whilst working. Something that would be almost impossible to experience in a mainstream classroom.

As children in cycle 3 near the end of their primary years, they start to develop both emotionally and physically. The vertical classroom acts as an area of comfort as children move into their teen years. The fact that Montessori classrooms encourage discussion, not just academic discussion but emotional and moral discussion, allows the older groups to rely on each other for support. They have learned throughout their years to nurture and to care for their younger peers and now it is time to look out for one another, to care and discuss feeling and emotions. Topics that would rarely be discussed in a mainstream classroom. Eissler states that '*Anything can be discussed between students in a Montessori class at any time. Help can be requested by anyone, and of anyone...Montessori is a community.*' (2009: 219)

In conclusion, the implications for vertical classrooms are enormous. They not only allow children to collaborate with older or younger peers, they allow children to have real life role models whom they respect and admire right in front of them, each and every day. They allow older students to resolve issues independently and set the scene for the emerging learners to follow. These factors allow students to leave cycle 3 and transition into high school with a sense of responsibility, a deep sense of morality, knowing full well their ability to make a difference and tackle injustice in the world.

### **References**

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