

Grammar In the Classroom

During this paper we will discuss the way the Montessori method helps prepare children for literacy understandings. We will also analyse the ways in which the Montessori materials aid the learning of grammar as pupils navigate towards the outcomes listed in the national syllabus.

When we talk about preparing children for literacy, it is important that we remember that the development of literacy and language begins from the day that children are born. We are not expecting newborns to be able to read the moment they open their eyes, but the preparation for literacy development starts many years before they enter cycle one.

In order to assist children to reach the expected outcomes and indicators as listed in the National Curriculum, we must remember that the foundations for literacy are language. These language skills, such as articulation, comprehension and vocabulary, are developed as the child grows. They begin from the very first days of a child's life and continue well into adulthood. The more exposed the child is to rich and varied language from a young age, the better prepared they will be once they start school. Montessori speaks of the importance of early exposure to language, "The child of two and-a-half has only two or three hundred words, but at six he knows thousands. And this happens without a teacher. It is a spontaneous acquisition." (Montessori 1988 :104) It is important to mention that language and literacy development can only happen through the activities, experiences and efforts of the children in the environment in which they are placed. This meaning, that whilst children are engaged within their environment, literacy development should prevail.

The absorbent mind, as Montessori called it, is a unique and very important period when the child's mind has the amazing ability to absorb a huge amount of information whilst establishing all the aspects of a human personality. During this time, children start to develop an understanding of language, which ultimately is the foundation for both writing and reading. These foundations are developed continuously as the child interacts with the environment and the people around him or her. The use of stories and the art of listening to a story is regarded as a huge influence upon the child's development of literacy skills from a young age. (Lillard 1972: 125) refers to the influence of storytelling on a child's literacy and language development. "*The children are read to often, from a wide variety of books about the lives of other people, other places, the life about them, and particularly the world of nature.*"

Literacy development is closely linked to the development of the child's mind. Once children have the foundations of language in place, they are then placed in a well prepared environment where materials and activities are carefully selected to expose them to differentiated literacy tasks. The Montessori method allows the child to choose from appropriate materials based on their own

interests, whilst they travel on a plane of progression, which ultimately leads them towards mastery in all areas of literacy including comprehension, writing, reading and grammar.

As the children move into the 6-12 age range, they will be exposed to a variety of materials to assist them to build upon the foundations set in the earlier years. When focusing on the development of grammar skills, the grammar boxes prove to be an invaluable resource. The beautifully designed grammar boxes expose the children to an in-depth understanding with regards to the different parts of speech. The emphasis of this material is word order, especially during transposition. Children are encouraged to rearrange the words and determine whether they make sense. As a flexible resource, they can be easily manipulated to create a variety of differentiated tasks. This flexibility allows them to be used in a variety of ways, especially when discussing placement of adverbs. The National Syllabus for English in NSW asks that during Stage 2 children should be able to, **“understand how adverb groups/phrases and prepositional phrases work in different ways to provide circumstantial details about an activity.” (ACELA1495)**. This material clearly has the capacity to meet these particular needs of the curriculum, and many more.

The grammar box materials include nine boxes in total, and incorporate a wide variety of activities that can be used alongside them. While children construct sentences and phrases, they use specially designed symbols to identify each part of speech. Grammatical features including pronouns, conjunctions and interjections are carefully recorded and used to assist during differentiated follow-up activities. The ability to use this material in such a diverse manner allows children to develop a concrete understanding of grammatical features and parts of speech. Ultimately, the grammar boxes offer a guided, but still open-ended exploration of the order of language. Feez speaks of the crucial role that sensorial objects and materials play in the prepared environment.

Through repetition and practice children will inevitably become confident in identifying parts of speech. This is the perfect opportunity for the children to be exposed to the sentence analysis material. Here the children begin identifying and understanding the standard parts of simple sentences such as verb phrase, direct and indirect objects, and adverbials. The NSW syllabus outcomes for Stage 3 grammar states that children should be able to, **“Identify and explain how choices in language, for example modality, emphasis, repetition and metaphor, influence personal response to different texts – EN3-6B.”** The sentence analysis material allows children to develop an understanding of why different words are used, and what impact they have upon the validity and strength of a sentence. Therefore, allowing them to respond to, or create a variety of texts whilst paying close consideration to the content of their writing and the target audience for whom it is intended.

The sentence analysis material adds new features to the ever-growing complexity of grammar which provokes great discussion and debate, and therefore creates interesting research-based investigations for groups and individuals based on the children's understanding. The sentences themselves are physically cut up and recorded, making this a hands-on experience that links directly to the way we select vocabulary every time we communicate. Through this process, the pupils are also exposed to the principles of syntax and appreciate the importance of punctuation to alter meaning. Feez speaks of the crucial role that sensorial objects and materials play in the prepared environment. *"Each set of sensorial objects is designed to isolate one quality so children can compare variations in that quality. When children use a set of objects in an exact and purposeful way, their perception is trained so they are able to discriminate between increasingly fine variations in that quality."* (Feez 2010 :81)

As the children move through the 6-12 classes, they will be more familiar with the materials, the use of grammar and the parts of speech. These materials are designed not to teach grammar directly but to inspire the children to be interested in their own language. The teaching of grammar in this way helps children to not only answer the question "What are these words?" but also "What do these words do, and why?"

Montessori often spoke of psychogrammar, the philosophy of grammar. By using these materials and this approach, we expose both grammar and syntax to the children. The materials allow children to understand grammar through a series of differentiated activities, which allows children to direct their own learning and make their own definitions. From this understanding of grammar and syntax, children are able to comprehend and are therefore exposed to the world around them, but from their own perspective. Eissler writes, "The teacher's preparation of the environment includes the careful selection of books – books which open up avenues for further exploration." (Eissler 2009: 96). This statement emphasises that, although we must assist children to find their way in understanding grammar, we must also prepare the environment to suit the needs of each and every child.

In conclusion, it is clear that the Montessori materials play a huge role in the development of grammar in the classroom. They provide the children with fun, hands-on activities that can be manipulated by the director to meet the differentiated needs of each group of children. Alongside this, it is clear that the preparation for the understanding of grammar and syntax starts from a very early age, and has a lot to do with the environment, both at home and at school. Language plays a pivotal role in the development of literacy within children. Exposure to a rich tapestry of vocabulary and narratives starts from the day a child is born and essentially paves the way for any future development.

Reference List

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