

THE MONTESSORI METHOD

Barbara Isaacs looks at the significance of Human Tendencies in the context of current early years practice...



understand the need of the child for freedom to move, choose, play, explore, share, watch and contemplate, as well as revisit and reflect.

For this freedom to be possible, adults must trust children's ability to choose what is needed for their development, but also to trust the activities on offer and the way the children engage with them. To reach deep understanding of what is happening, the adults must observe, carefully consider what they are seeing, and deliberate on their interpretations. Montessori also urges the adults not to interrupt children concentrating and involved in play. She believes that this interruption may disturb the flow and undermine a child's efforts.

Exploration and the EYFS

When we apply these principles to the way in which young children engage with objects in treasure baskets, we can reflect on Montessori's views. The baby who can sit unaided in front of the treasure basket will engage with those objects that satisfy her need for exploration; her ability to manipulate and investigate these objects will improve with practice whilst they captivate her attention for extended periods of time. When given an opportunity to engage with the basket regularly the child will manage to find the same object repeatedly, until one day the need to investigate the same thing will vanish and another object will be explored.

If we interpret this human tendency for exploration and orientation in context of the three prime areas of learning, we can see that by preparing the treasure basket with care and attention to detail, the adult has facilitated learning and development by supporting the child's physical development where manipulation guides sensory learning, by enabling the child to make choices.

Children are also communicating with us;

their body language is telling us they are interested in the object, enjoy exploring it and learning about its properties. The adults often acknowledge this concentration of effort, autonomy and enjoyment with a smile of encouragement, or a brief comment, and later as the child revisits the object, language is often added to enhance the sensory experience.

As practitioners, we need to appreciate the importance of the growing sense of self within the child and ensure that young children are given time and space to explore in this way – a sense of achievement at this stage of their lives will enable them to take on challenges and use their initiative when older. Montessori tells us that this 'unconscious' absorption of the environment in the first three years of life creates a firm foundation for later learning.

Bearing in mind these principles, consider the recent proposals that two-year-olds are taught in small groups. Consider the effect this approach may have not only on the two-year-old's motivation but on their concept of self. Over a hundred years ago Montessori advocated that young children are active learners, that their unique potential should be supported by learning through manipulation with their hands and exploration of their environment. Whilst there are moments when they enjoy closeness and stillness when listening to a story or singing a song, toddlers want to be on the move – transporting, rotating, posting and enveloping to mention just a few of the schemas we can observe in their daily activities, and which reflect their human tendencies.

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In recent articles I have reflected on Montessori's concept of human tendencies, and their evidence in children's development, particularly in relation to their sensitive periods. These are, for many Montessori teachers, developmental landmarks that guide our understanding of children and influence our work with them. In this context it is also important to reflect on how these biological, genetic tendencies influence our practice in relation to the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2012).

The three key principles that underpin learning and development in the EYFS correlate closely with Montessori's ideal of supporting individual children by developing their unique potential. For this uniqueness to unfold, children need a favourable environment, carefully prepared to meet all their individual needs and interests. Another essential prerequisite is a knowledgeable, sensitive adult who not only prepares the physical environment but also creates an atmosphere conducive to learning.

The role of the adult in the Montessori prepared environment is to make it possible for children to access the activities and materials spontaneously, facilitating a free-flow of learning both inside and in the outside classroom. This free-flow is possible if adults