

THE Montessori METHOD



Barbara Isaacs

continues her series on Montessori

practice throughout the early years by looking at children in their fourth year of life...

By the time children reach age four they have usually established their first important friendships. They often come to nursery with ideas about what they will do with their friends, and should they find themselves alone they may feel somewhat lost. The social aspect in their nursery experience plays a very important role at this stage of their development. Practitioners also note that these friendships begin to focus on gender and feature gender polarization; what I mean is that, given free choice, the girls often gravitate towards working in small groups on tables, making extensive use of the craft activities and devoting much time to drawing, cutting, gluing and generally creating small pieces of art; whereas the boys will prefer being floor bound, planning and constructing castles, space stations, road maps and other three-dimensional structures. Those practitioners who listen carefully will also hear very diverse conversations reflecting the gender interests. The emerging conflict will be as different as the creative expressions: whilst the boys will use their strength to resolve their differences, the girls will be as forceful in their use of words.

Many of a setting's four-year-olds will begin to demonstrate their skills at being the leaders of learning in the classroom as they are the oldest; they have the capacity to take on new responsibilities such as helping to organise the classroom for lunch, and to be role models for the younger children, helping them not only with tasks such as putting on shoes and coats when going outside but also in the book area,

when they may be encouraged to share their books with the younger children or lead in a game of snap or dominoes. As their cognitive skills grow, their ability to show empathy emerges too. They make an invaluable contribution to the cohesion within the nursery - providing they have the opportunity to attend a mixed-ages nursery, with two to five-year-olds in the same room.

Extending learning

I appreciate that this reflection may represent a somewhat stereotypical view, and I'm aware that we need to acknowledge these differences and ensure we provide for diverse types of engagement within the indoor and outdoor environments. We also need to offer new possibilities for encouraging children's activities which will extend the established patterns of play and model other possible types of behaviour, to ensure that all children's learning dispositions and preferred ways of learning are acknowledged, accommodated and challenged.

Employing a male practitioner is very likely to add to the dynamics of the nursery and may enable girls to engage in more rough and tumble play whilst the boys might participate in discussions and conversations. As the majority of early years practitioners are women, we must be aware of our own views and attitudes, and how they affect our daily work and influence the children's views.

The extension of learning into outdoor areas and the introduction of forest school

activities within the early years curriculum have enabled us to observe some wonderful cooperative play involving boys and girls, and have facilitated wider learning opportunities not only for the children but also for staff. I often find that when the children really engage in activities, are concentrating all their energies and are focused on the task, harmony and cohesion emerge. The children begin to show consideration and concern for each other, and their natural good manners become visible. They share ideas and problem-solve, each making his/her unique contribution. It's during these times that the adult can step aside and observe the natural spirit of the children.

Montessori urges us in her writing to help children in their use of their 'physical and mental energies' to focus on a task and concentrate. This is why Montessori practitioners prepare a learning environment with a wide range of stimulating activities reflecting children's interests. The practitioners take great care in preparing their classrooms to facilitate children's natural rhythms and spontaneous learning. This environment needs to provide opportunities to develop independence, decision making and concentration. When these qualities are established, the practitioners witness the birth of new attitudes and skills such as initiative, resilience and an ability to take risks. A whole person, an autonomous being emerges, and this transformation leads to the next stage of development. The children are now ready to enter primary school, where their ability to concentrate, socialise and be independent will help in their transition from nursery to school, and from the first stage of development to the second. Their families and the practitioners in the nursery will have made a significant contribution to the transformation.

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