

The Elementary Age Child

Introduction

Dr. Maria Montessori developed a theory of child development which she referred to as the *Planes of Development* which spans the time from conception to the age of twenty-four. There are four planes of development each in six years spans: infancy (conception to six years), childhood (six year to twelve years), adolescence (twelve years to eighteen years), and maturity (eighteen years to twenty-four years). Each plan of development identifies the characteristics that are unique to the child at that particular span of time. Each plane has a special task of self-development for the child which is supported within the child by what Montessori called “sensitive periods.” Montessori recognized each of the four planes of development to be so unique as to be called “rebirths.”

Through each plane of development is unique its genesis is within the prior plane. Indeed, the characteristics or tasks of the prior plane construct the inner foundation for the next plane of development. So, also, once an inner characteristic has been developed within a child the sensitive period for that characteristic disappears for its task is accomplished. The planes of development are so essential to the development of the child that Montessori called them the “constructive rhythm of life.” Each plane of development begins with the emergence of sensibilities within the child which increase in intensity in support of the child’s acquisition of he required characteristic. The intensity of the sensibility peaks and then wanes symmetrically across the six year span. The newly acquired ability remains as a permanent characteristic of the human being.

The theory of the planes of development is the overarching structure within which each plane or stage in the child’s development is understood. While the child exists as a unified, organically integrate personality the planes of development may be examined from the perspective of the cognitive, moral, and social-emotional development of the individual. The second plane of development, childhood, is examined from these four dimensions.

Characteristics of Childhood Ages Six through Twelve Years

The child between six and twelve years exhibits the ability to abstract from the sensory-based concrete experience, the ability to imagine that which is not concretely observable, interest in the culture which includes the life sciences, physical sciences, social sciences and the arts, interest in the exploration of morality, and movement toward emotional independence and social acceptance.

Cognitive Development

As the child matures mentally the ability to abstract from sensory-based concrete experiences finds expression in the very nature of the questions the

child asks. While in infancy (conception to six years) the child asks labeling questions (“What is this?”), in Montessori’s planes of development called childhood (six to twelve years) the child asks questions of function (“How did...?” “Why is...?”). The child is no longer bound merely to the sensory or concrete stimulus but asks question that probe beyond sensory impressions. Further, the child becomes impatient with manipulation of concrete mathematical materials. The child begins to mentally manipulate the materials, and then moves into a realm of complex mental scaffolding.

The second plane of development also finds the child using imagination to understand and to incarnate that, which is not sensorially accessible. Propositions, such as, “What if...?”, “Now suppose that...” posit questions that allow the child to move past the concrete experience to the imaginative. From a concrete knowledge base the child scaffolds knowledge through the use of creative imagination. The child’s double ability to imagine and to abstract support each other in the task of incarnating abstract aspects of the world.

The child’s love for culture during this second plane of development allows for the introduction of the life sciences, the physical sciences, the social sciences, and the arts. The seeds of culture are planted with intellectual honest within the context of the structure of the discipline examined. The curriculum of the six to twelve year old is parallel to traditional middle and high school curricula.

Moral Development

The child’s emergent conscience with the question of good and evil in the world, and in one’s daily decision making regarding right and wrong, develops a system of inner ethics for the child. During this second plane of development the mental facility to ask “What...?” and “ Why...?” support the child’s sensitivity to probe questions of fairness and justice. During this second plane of development the child internalizes a moral code, which is also concurrent with the child’s social development.

Social / Emotional Development

Montessori observed an intense interest in the six to twelve year old child to develop cooperative and sharing strategies with peers. The conventional wisdom forces this experience on the child under six years; Montessori emphasizes socialization with the six to twelve year child. Socialization at this age takes on aspects of fairness, turns, rules and consequences for transgressions, and group membership.

While socially the child forms an allegiance to peers, emotionally the child moves beyond the family. As the child strives for physical independence in the first plane of development, during the second plane of development the child strives for emotional independence. Rudeness and willfulness are behaviors that signal the transition toward emotional independence. Acceptance by peers becomes critical to the child. Questions of self-esteem and self-assertion tightly

link the social and the emotional life of the child. The child's emotional life is developing within a social, peer-entered context. While praise and assurance to the child under six is not necessary to support the child's emergent physical independence, the six to twelve year old child requires praise and recognition as temporary supports to developing emotional independence. As secure emotional independence is established rudeness diminishes, and a period of calm and stability are the characteristics of the second plane of development.

The second and fourth plane of development is parallel in their sense of emotional calm and stability.

Characteristics of the Montessori Elementary Program

Montessori programs, at whatever plane of development, are defined by the nature of the child. For that reason defining the characteristics of the classroom necessarily takes the lead from an understanding of the nature or characteristics of the child. Therefore, the prior discussion on the nature or characteristics of the child is the framework for characterizing the Montessori elementary program.

Cognitive Development

The curriculum focuses on answering the child's questions of "why" and "how" which are essentially functional questions rather than labeling questions of a younger age. The child's ability to abstract and look to the deeper questions underlying a sensorial experience drive the curriculum. Manipulatives are utilized as the concrete experience that allow for the abstracting child to manipulate ideas.

The child is capable of imagining that which is not sensorially perceivable. Therefore, the past, the future, the present not directly experienced are accessible to the children's mind through the imagination. The "Time Line of Life" is the reference point in the study of history, life sciences and geography because of the child's ability to imagine the past from a basis of knowledge.

Subjects in the life sciences, physical sciences, social sciences, and arts are present in response to the child's interest in all aspects of culture. The key concepts in these fields of study are presented with intellectual integrity and with a focus on the structure of the discipline examined.

Moral Development

The child takes increasing responsibility for proper conduct, and for the management of the classroom. Questions of right and wrong are discussed at the class meetings, and between and among the children in the classroom. Responsible conduct finds its expression in personal relationships and assuming responsibility for the care of the environment.