

# Why Montessori for the Elementary Years

By Sanford Jones

This is an excerpt of a speech given by Sanford Jones for the American Montessori Teacher's Workshop in Minneapolis, Minnesota, June 1971. Mr. Jones is a noted pre-primary and elementary Montessori teacher and a holder of two international certificates. He received the training for children ages six to twelve at the International center for Montessori Studies in Bergamo, Italy. For the past two years, Mr. Jones has served as the founding president of the North American Montessori Teachers' Association.

"Why should the child continue in Montessori after age six? This is a question asked by many parents who honestly appreciate the value of Montessori experience from ages three to six, but who have not been persuaded that a Montessori experience beyond age six will be of significantly greater value than a public or private school experience of a more traditional nature. Often because most Montessori teachers in this country have not had the elementary training, we may feel ill equipped to give a convincing answer; so, I would like to share with you...the value of keeping the child in Montessori during the elementary years from six to twelve years of age.

In order to understand the similarities and differences of the elementary approach in comparison with preschool, let's review the characteristics of the first and second planes of development. If Montessori is to be the natural approach to child rearing, it must then be based on nature and takes its cues from the conservative predictable unfolding of the universal child's personality. I use conservative in the sense that the sensitivities of the child repeat themselves unalterably from culture to culture and from generation to generation. It is only when the influence of the culture stifles or in some way perverts the universal tendencies of the child that the child appears unique or special. Let us cater to the universal needs of children. Let's keep in mind the normalization of the child as our goal.

So, let's construct a chart listing some characteristics of the first two planes of development.

## First Plane of Development

Birth  
to  
Six  
Absorbency  
Facts  
Construction of Self  
Materialization

## Second Plane of Development

Six  
to  
Twelve  
Reason  
Relationships  
Building of Community  
Towards Abstraction

Under the first plane, birth to six, we can start with the characteristic of absorbency. The child will take from his environment indiscriminately whatever is available. Reason is not yet fully functioning. In contrast, during the second plane, from six to twelve, although the child...especially the child who has had a rich environment from which to absorb during the years from birth to six...will continue to do much peripheral absorptive learning, the thrust of his effort is toward active, conscious learning. The child has discovered reason.

The second comparison: from birth to six the child is interested primarily in facts. He wants to know WHAT and WHERE. This is the Amazon River. This is a rhombus. This pitch is C. He is interested in facts. By contrast, the child of six to twelve years is

interested in facts only insofar as he can relate them. His primary interest is the WHY, the WHEN, the HOW. For example, on a recent trip to an art gallery in Washington with my seven and eight year old children, we were visiting some rooms of Oriental art. We first visited the room of Japanese art, then passed on to the room of Korean art and one of the children observed, "It is interesting how the Korean art is very similar to the Japanese art because after all, they are only separated by a small body of water, and therefore it is easy for them to communicate." Now, in order for the child to make that observation and that reason of judgment, he had had to work with the puzzle map of Asia...he had noticed subconsciously from the age of two and a half, the proximity of Japan to Korea.

A third comparison we'll make is that with which we regard socialization. While the child from birth to six is primarily at work on self-construction, and to that end works alone, quietly and with great concentration, the child from six to twelve is extremely sociable and group oriented, concerned with constructing a self image, determined to a great extent by the feedback of his peers. In the elementary class, a community emerges...work is done in groups rather than singly. There is less quiet. There is more correspondences, conversation, comparison, and sharing of ideas.

The following comparison has to do with the process of learning itself. We know that in the preschool class, the child learns by active, controlled manipulation of concrete materials. Everything is materialized for the child. Never is more given to the mind than to the hand. At the elementary level, although manipulation of materials is still a large part of the learning process, more and more the children work with manipulation of symbols: mathematical symbols, the written work, algebra, geometric formulae, chemistry, and physics equations, etc. The end product is, of course, the internalization of the concepts gained through the manipulation of materials at the preschool level and symbols at the elementary level. So, eventually, the child is free to manipulate ideas without sensorial aids. Therefore, under birth to six we can write 'materialization' and under six to twelve, we can write 'towards abstraction'.

Now, given these differences in the nature of the children during the first two planes of development, how does this help us to answer the original question, "why keep your child in Montessori beyond age six? The answer, I think, lies in the fact that Montessori theory and practice, when rightly understood and applied, cooperates with the nature of the child. It does not work against it."

Let's re-examine the characteristics that we listed in the second plane and discover how a Montessori elementary environment allows the natural tendencies of the child to operate.

First: **reason**. The crucial difference I have found between the child who is a successful learner and the one who is not could be described as a difference in awareness. The child of six years of age no longer learns primarily by absorption, but by direct application of the conscious will. How does a Montessori environment foster this capacity? The answer is very simple. A Montessori environment allow the will of the child to be operative, as opposed to a traditional approach where a child's interest may not coincide with the teacher's plan or with what is available in the environment. In the Montessori environment, it is the active consciousness that determines the activity of the child. The environment is the avenue by which the child exercises his conscious choice. The question most frequently asked me by observers in my class is "How do you make sure that every child gets every lesson?" Well, my answer is that I don't, because the important thing is that the environment be as complete, as rich, as stimulating as possible with as great as possible

a variety of activities going on so that geometry is in the air, biology is in the air, history is in the air. Because there is so much horizontal learning going on among the children, it is the teacher's primary job simply to keep the children's interest alive by giving a variety of lessons in each area of the curriculum. Although, as at the preschool level, there is a prescribed sequence of lessons to be given for each areas, this does not mean that each child will have every single lesson. If this were so, the sheer volume of things to teach would inundate and overwhelm the child. No, the Montessori environment kindles the interest of every child...not by seeing that he learns every possible element of geometry, but by keeping geometry alive in the environment of the classroom, and furthermore, by relating geometry to the larger environment...for example, architectural styles. I picture of an aerial view of the Pentagon on the geometric cabinet. He said, "The Pentagon really is a pentagon, isn't it?"

The second characteristic of the elementary age child: **relationships**. If the Montessori experience from three to six has been a good one, the child arrived at age five or six with a tremendous storehouse of information in all areas of the curriculum. In history, the history of housing, food, costumes, weapons, musical instruments, ships, etc; in geography, a knowledge of the physical features of the worlds, its land and water forms, and nations, flags, and national costumes; in biology, an appreciation of the world of nature, plants, and animals and things inanimate, leaf shapes, animal and plant rootings, minerals; in mathematics, and understanding of the four basic number operations, both with whole numbers and with fractions; and acquaintance with elementary principles of physics and biology through science experiments; in language, an ability to communicate in four ways, by listening, speaking, writing and reading. So the child who has been prepared is ready to relate facts. For example, if a lion is a mammal and a bear is a mammal, what is it that they share? If Japanese and Korean art are similar, why is this so? If the Nile Valley is in Egypt and the Egyptian civilization grew up along the Nile, what bearing did the river have on the lives of the people? These are the kinds of questions in which a six year old child is legitimately interested.

The point is this: if the mind of the child is naturally disposed to reasoning power, in order for his reasoning to be operative, he must already have internalized the facts with which to work. This is precisely why a traditional situation which takes the child at age six, cannot serve the natural tendencies of the child. In such a school, the children must spend the first three years of their school lives gaining the tools in mathematics and language and gaining the facts of the cultural subjects. It's practically fourth grade before the natural tendency of the mind can begin to function

The third characteristic: **building of community**. A Montessori environment allows free exchange between members of the group and consequently, allows horizontal learning to occur. This means that the older children help the younger children, thus reinforcing their own learning; and, the younger ones have more than one source, the teacher, from whom to seek help. Freedom of movement is allowed, as us freedom to group together for their projects. In the same way that at the preschool level, the work by the child alone serves to construct an individual, so at the elementary level, the work on two's and three's and sometimes by the whole class serves to create a social unity – a community.

The final characteristic of the second plane that we have listed is **towards abstraction**. As we've said before, the learning process for the young child involves personal, active controlled manipulation of materials. The child absorbs the concretized concepts by using the Montessori material in a specialized way. As the child approaches age six, what is the

justification for keeping him in a Montessori environment? Now that he has arrived at the age of reason, why continue to use the sensorial approach? Why not simply put him in a traditional setting? After all, there are many teaching aids, audio-visual aids, flash cards, self-teaching workbooks etc., that can in effect do the same thing. No, there is a distinct difference, a very basic difference between teaching aids and didactic material. Teaching aids are aids to the teacher in presenting materials – ways to make materials more accessible to the child – picture material, films, charts, maps. Truly didactic material in the Montessori sense is material used independently by the child at his own discretion and of his own free will, which leads toward internalization of the materialized concept. A Montessori environment continues to provide this for the child at the elementary level. I think the beauty of the Montessori material at the elementary level is that the child learns new and exciting things about the same material that he used when he was two and a half years old.

To have the child continue in Montessori beyond age six is to allow for the continuous unfolding of this development in a prepared environment and to allow the possibility of continuing growth toward the power of abstraction using the Montessori materials as a vehicle.