

SELF-ASSESSMENT OF PRESCHOOLERS IN THE MONTESSORI SYSTEM

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Abstract. Educational alternatives, essential for the diversification and improvement of the education system, offer new perspectives to better respond to the needs and aspirations of pupils and pre-schoolers, as well as to the requirements of parents, teachers and educational communities. Being different from the traditional forms, they are a beneficial way for a dynamic and open educational system, involving diverse approaches to the organization and conduct of instructional-educational activities in schools and kindergartens in terms of structure, teaching methods and educational objectives. In our country we find six educational models (Montessori, Step by Step, Waldorf, Freinet, Jena Plan and Curative Pedagogy) as alternatives to traditional education. Some aim for significant changes in general pedagogical ideals or goals, while others aim for more specific or narrow goals, but regardless of the extent of the difference, the essential point is that each promotes the holistic development of children by individualizing the educational process, fostering healthy social relationships through openness to communication and collaboration with all educational partners. It promotes new and different ways of achieving educational goals, capitalizing on aspects less emphasized in traditional education. Cuciureanu et al. emphasize the roles and functions of educational alternatives: (1) some alternatives may be designed to correct deficiencies or gaps identified in the formal education system; (2) they may replace or complement certain forms of traditional education with different or complementary teaching methodologies; (3) they may involve a reorganization of the institutional framework and the way the school itself functions (Albulescu, 2014, p. 7; Cuciureanu et al., 2011, pp. 8-9).

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Introduction

Now implemented in 154 countries around the world, the educational alternative created by Maria Montessori in the early 1990s puts the dynamic triad of child, adult and environment at its center. Pedagogue, anthropologist, psychiatrist and pediatrician, Maria Montessori (1870-1952) initially worked with children with intellectual disabilities. She discovered that healing came not only from drug treatment, but mainly through appropriate pedagogy with these children. In 1907 he set up the first "Casa dei Bambini" in a neighborhood in Rome for 3-7 year old children without disabilities, but where he applied this distinctive pedagogy based on observation and experimentation. The aim of education in Montessori kindergartens is to develop the child holistically, providing opportunities for

independent learning in pairs or small groups and active exploration with those of their own choosing. Because there is no set time to complete tasks, no competition among children, and no extrinsic rewards or punishments, the child learns sensory concepts (shape, color, size, texture), or academic concepts of literacy, math, history, geography, or science by manipulating specially designed objects (Marshall, 2017, p. 1).

In Montessori Pedagogy, children "develop through themselves, in a specially prepared environment...due to a natural, natural desire to learn what they need and when they need it" (Albulescu, 2014, p. 19). This method respects the child's freedom, offering him/her a friendly, pleasant, attractive *environment*, encompassing everything necessary for his/her overall development. The classrooms are bright, always tidy, warmly colored, arranged in such a way as to develop children's independence and satisfy their desire to explore. The atmosphere in Montessori kindergartens is one of harmony, stimulating, based on respect for oneself, for others and for the environment, although the groups are large, with up to 30-35 children of different ages, each with a teacher and a supervising assistant.

Principles of Montessori pedagogy

The Montessori method is based on a child-centered educational philosophy that emphasizes independence, exploration, and respect for a child's natural development. Its key principles include:

- *Child-centered learning*: Each child is viewed as an individual with unique learning needs, abilities, and interests. The method allows them to progress at their own pace.
- *Prepared environment*: Classrooms are designed to encourage independence and discovery. They include specific materials and tools that support hands-on, self-directed learning.
- *Freedom with responsibility*: Children are given the freedom to choose their activities and work autonomously, but within a structured framework of respect and responsibility.
- *Learning through exploration*: Montessori places strong emphasis on sensory experiences and practical activities. Children learn abstract concepts through concrete, tactile materials.
- *Role of the educator*: Educators act as guides or facilitators rather than traditional instructors, observing and supporting the child's development without imposing their own agenda.
- *Intrinsic motivation*: Instead of external rewards like grades or prizes, the Montessori method fosters an internal drive for learning and achievement.
- *Mixed-age classrooms*: Children of different ages learn together, allowing for peer teaching, collaboration, and the development of social skills.

Montessori pedagogy in kindergartens

Considering that the order in the group room leads the child to be orderly both in daily work and in thinking, *the materials* adapted to the individual needs of the

child are grouped into four learning areas: mathematics, language, practical life and sensory development, placed on open shelves at the children's height, always positioned in the same place. If the preschooler wants to handle certain materials, which are usually in a single copy, they wait for the child who is just playing to put them on the shelf. After he has worked at his own pace and in the amount of time he deems necessary, he places the material on the shelf in the same place from where he picked it up, ready for the next child who wishes to work. The materials, adapted quantitatively and qualitatively to suit the child's specific needs, are placed on trays or in boxes of different sizes and become authentic means of development and advanced learning. The child is free to choose the teaching materials and move around the classroom according to his or her own inner impulse, working at the table or on the floor, on a special mat that demarcates the working area. Through this freedom, she develops her ability to make decisions about herself and can become more independent (Albulescu, 2014, pp. 28-29).

The teacher in Montessori pedagogy acts as a guide and facilitator of learning, who presents the appropriate materials to the child in a precise manner and slowly enough to allow the child to observe and understand them. The fundamental principles of this educational approach center on the idea that preschoolers are capable of learning and developing on their own, thus the role of the teacher is to guide and facilitate this process rather than to teach and correct. They only intervene when they notice that a child needs help or is interfering with other children, and even then, the intervention is limited to allow the child to solve problems on their own as much as possible. In terms of correcting mistakes, it is considered important to give the child the time and resources to learn from mistakes and to develop understanding naturally. Through this approach, autonomy, self-confidence, and satisfaction from the child's personal accomplishments are promoted without resorting to external punishment or rewards (Juca & Buia, 2013, p. 206).

To *evaluate* children's progress, in the Montessori system, no grades or grades, ranking or rewards are used and children are not compared with each other, but only with themselves. It is a permanent observation that follows the child's progress from the first to the last day of kindergarten. The aim of the assessment is to stimulate the child to enrich his or her knowledge, to explore and discover as much as possible of the surrounding reality, to understand and assimilate new knowledge. By observing the child directly and constantly and keeping rigorous daily records of these observations, teachers are able to keep a close eye on children's development in different areas. At the end of each semester, the class teachers work together to draft an evaluation letter, providing the parents with a summary of the child's activity throughout the period. This letter includes detailed information about the progress and skills acquired by the child, highlighting aspects about the topics studied in the different subjects, the way they approach activities, their interactions with other children and the adults around them, and their personal development (Agheană, 2019, p. 18).

Children receive feedback and *self-assess* themselves through interaction with their peers. When a child tries to explain to a peer how to do an activity or type of

work, they are put in a position to communicate that information clearly and coherently. During this process, the child giving the explanation can observe the peer's reaction and realize whether or not they have understood. This gives the explaining child an opportunity for real-time self-evaluation. If his/her explanation is effective and the peer understands easily, this can give him/her confidence in his/her abilities and confirmation that he/she has understood the material correctly. Otherwise, if the explanation is not clear or the peer is having difficulty, the child may see this reaction as an opportunity to improve his or her communication and understand the topic more deeply (Lillard, 2017, p. 206).

A day in a Montessori kindergarten

A typical day in a Montessori kindergarten is organized to encourage exploration, autonomy and active learning. Although it may vary from kindergarten to kindergarten, here is a general example of the structure of the day:

- *Welcoming the children and transition activities:* Children are welcomed in a calm and welcoming environment. They may choose to engage in quiet activities, such as reading or games, to settle in.
- *Time for individual or small group work:* This is the most important part of the day. Children choose Montessori materials that appeal to their interests, whether they are math, language, science or hands-on activities. Educators provide individual guidance but do not intervene in the exploration process.
- *Snack Break:* Children can participate in meal preparation or tidying up the space, helping to develop independence and practical skills.
- *Outdoor activities:* Montessori kindergartens emphasize connecting with nature, so outdoor time is frequent, including free play, gardening or exploring the environment.
- *Time for creative projects:* Children may participate in art, music, dance or other projects that stimulate their creativity.
- *End of the day:* Children help clean and organize materials, contributing to a sense of order and responsibility. The day ends with a quiet activity such as storytelling or meditation.

This flexible structure allows children to develop at their own pace and become confident and independent.

The Montessori pedagogy represents an innovative, child-centered educational philosophy that promotes the harmonious development of a child through active learning, autonomy, and respect for their natural pace. It encourages curiosity, responsibility, and intrinsic motivation, creating a prepared environment where children can explore, learn, and collaborate freely. This method not only offers a different approach to traditional education but also aims to shape confident, empathetic, and independent individuals, equipped to face life's challenges. It is an educational path that respects the uniqueness of each child and values the holistic development of their potential, whether academic, social, or emotional.

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