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Creating unlimited opportunities to learn

Writing and reading comprehension: these are two measures on which public school students are regularly assessed in today's test-obsessed culture. In public schools, they try to impose outside reading programs onto the kindergarten curriculum like guided reading and writer's workshop. In our own conference halls, we talk about other programs to "add on" to our core work like Handwriting without Tears. Some Montessori guides appreciate these programs. Others fight them. Others are uncertain.

The core question is: are we meeting the entire needs of the child's language development in the Montessori 3-6 program? Well, when you observe (assuming of course that you DO observe), do you see the following?

- Grace & courtesy being role-played, dramatically acted out and happily put into practice by the children
- Polite, joyful conversation
- A clean, well-used painting easel and chalkboard
- The geometry cabinet shapes being traced with the fingers
- *I Spy* and other sound games being played
- Movable alphabet words, phrases and stories *that the children want to write* (not driven by picture cards)
- Beautiful and meticulous metal inset work
- Labels *written by the children* for objects throughout the classroom
- Charades or other function of words work being "played"
- Personalized language materials being *made by the children* (pictures drawn in their own hands, sentences from their own minds, assembled in the form of reading classification work)

This is a short list, just a starting point. There are many other observable phenomenon that indicate that the children are flourishing with language. But as I observe in classrooms and review assessment data, these are some of the key foundational pieces many of us seem to be letting slide.

There are so many reasons why these and other activities matter. I just want to touch on three of the core concepts.

Verbal communication

Children arrive before us with a diverse history of experience. In some cases, that experience is vast and they have immense vocabularies. In other cases, that experience is more limited and their grasp of basic words is just forming. In all cases, we must meet the child where she is and tailor our approach to her needs and interests. We have to gain an understanding of what words they

need and then teach them directly via the three-period lesson and indirectly through our dialogue. Then, of course, we have to give them a chance to USE the words they are learning. (Think here about natural conversations; discussing the weather, the calendar, upcoming events; telling stories; reading books; reciting poetry; singing songs; playing command games.)

Now, why would a child want to use their new words? Well, in most children, there is some kind of internal drive to speak, but in some children, words are not freely offered. For all children, they must have a motive, a reason to communicate and feel they are emotionally safe to try. This is where relationship comes into play.

Modeling & relationship: Research shows that we literally learn by participating in each other. In neuroscience they talk about mirror neurons. This is how mirror neurons work: When I watch someone yawn, the same part of my brain that is active when I yawn lights up. So I am experiencing your yawn as if it were my own. I participate directly in your experience. This is why our modeled behavior is so essential to the child's positive development. Their minds are using the same parts of the brain that our minds are using. If we are cranky, distracted and distant, they will be too. It's in their neurons!

Luckily, we have options. If your temperament is a bit wild, you can work on taming it. Sitting to observe is a great beginning ... training yourself to watch without interfering. Music can also be a great help in this area. It trains the ear and engages the heart. Maybe it will soften ours just a bit on the days when we and/or the children could use a little TLC. Then, an emotional connection between us and the music, between ourselves and the children arises. "We feel therefore we learn."

So, for a rich verbal experience, children need direct vocabulary instruction (knowledge), the chance and a reason to use their vocabulary (practice), and social relationships that engage their spirit and make them feel safe (motivation/emotional engagement).

Writing: Psychological preparation

I remember hearing the list of psychological aspects of writing in my training course. It was so funny to think of writing as a mental task. I had always slotted it as muscular. I guess this is why the leaders in education and neuroscience today all have their degrees in psychology instead of education; you can't have one without the other. Just like Maria, who was never so fooled.

- Before they can write, a child needs:
- an organized mind (so he can express himself);

- knowledge of words to form complete sentences;
- knowledge of sounds;
- the ability to recognize sounds in words;
- recognizing the symbols that correspond to different sounds;
- self confidence;
- the desire to write.

These last two points are my favorites. They totally re-orient us to the truth. If a child doesn't believe he is capable, he will not risk error. If a child is not interested, he will not pursue a work. We must give the children unlimited opportunities to witness their own abilities and give them work that calls to their internal drives.

Sometimes I feel the children would be best served if I tied my hands behind my back and slapped tape over my mouth. We are so driven to "help," but we just constantly get in the way and rob the children of opportunities to witness their own capacities.

Scaffold, fade & observe: Now I want to clarify something here. I am not talking about turning a blind eye to children in need. I am talking about scaffolding, fading and observing. We step in and help in the smallest way possible and then fade back to let the child do as much as he can. We hold the button hole open for a moment. We say, "Do the first part," when the child presents their untied shoe before us. We encourage them without praising them by simply smiling when we see them succeed or saying things like, "everyone needs a little help sometimes," or "you're getting it. I remember when you couldn't do that part but now you can," or "yes, you did it."

So, for a child's mind to be able to write, the child needs to know about the structure, sounds and components of our language (knowledge), to witness that they are capable/have self confidence (practice), and the desire to write (motivation/emotional engagement).

Reading: Comprehension

Reading comprehension means an internal, deep understanding of text. It's the top layer of total reading. But does our program help children gain this understanding? What do you think I'm going to say ... YES! But only when we model all the steps and then free the child to put his own voice into the program.

Here's what I mean. We start the formal reading program with the phonetic object box. This work actually tests their comprehension of individual words since they must match a picture (concept) with a word label (text). Then, we give the children the handwritten slips we wrote in that first

presentation so they can create their own book of first words; we make it personal. Labeling the environment is similar: work with individual words, demonstrate meaning by linking the text with an actual object, and embellish the slips to add to the child's growing word dictionary.

With puzzle words and the phonogram folders, we dialogue with the child to create examples of each word in a phrase or sentence that clarifies its meaning. To demonstrate mastery, we play dictation so the child can create his own list of mastered words.

Just before sentence analysis, we start to break apart phrases and work more intensely with the job each word does. The children cut up phrases and sentences and then put them back together, playing with the order. Then they keep their slips to paste into a notebook or make into a book.

In all of these reading comprehension activities, there is a direct understanding of vocabulary (knowledge), opportunities to manipulate and work with the components of language (practice), and a personal connection with the text (motivation/emotional engagement).

Hark! I think I see a pattern! And, wouldn't you know, it looks just like the three-period lesson.

- Knowledge (This is...)
 - Practice (Show me ...)
 - Motivation/Emotional Connection (What is this... Why do I care?)
- The Montessori approach to language is so simple and elegant. Yet we keep looking elsewhere instead of going deeper with what we already know.

Every time we introduce a new material/program to our classrooms, we add burden to ourselves. There is something additional that we need to master, maintain and grow to love. I think maybe there is enough burden and obligation in our lives already. Before we consider introducing new programs, let's just pause and observe. Maybe the gentlest, most enjoyable, and most effective path would be to simply relax and immerse ourselves in the beauty of what we already know. If we love it and engage with it deeply, the children will too.

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