



The Importance of the Kindergarten Year in the Montessori Classroom

by **Tim Seldin, President
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When a child transfers from Montessori to a new kindergarten, whether in a public or private environment, she spends the first few months adjusting to a new class, a new teacher, and a whole new system with different expectations. This, along with the fact that most kindergartens have a much lower set of expectations for five-year-olds than most Montessori programs, severely cuts into the learning that could occur during this crucial year.

Montessori is an approach to working with children that is carefully based on what we've learned about children's cognitive, neurological and emotional development from several decades of research. Although sometimes misunderstood, the Montessori approach has been acclaimed as the most developmentally appropriate model currently available by some of America's top experts on early childhood and elementary education.

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The kindergarten year is a critical component of the three-year Early Childhood Montessori program. This is the year when children's earlier experiences are internalized and reinforced. When they leave Montessori before kindergarten, many of their earlier learning experiences may be lost because they are not reinforced or completely understood.

how it helps the young child to learn how to learn.

Over recent years, educational research has increasingly shown that students in many schools don't really understand most of what they are being taught. Howard Gardner, Harvard Psychologist and author of the best selling book *The Unschooled Mind* goes so far as to suggest that, "Many schools have fallen into a pattern of giving kids exercises and drills that result in their getting answers on tests that look like understanding. Most students, from as young as those in kindergarten to students in some of the finest colleges in America, do not understand what they've studied – in the most basic sense of the term. They lack the capaci-



But won't my five-year-old spend her kindergarten year taking care of younger children instead of doing her own work?

No, not at all! When older children work with younger ones, they tend to learn more from the experience than their "students." Experiences that facilitate development of a child's independence are often very limited in traditional schools.

Most five-year-olds have been waiting for the longest time to be one of the "big kids." The experience of playing the leadership role does wonders to reinforce the five-year-olds's sense of autonomy and self-confidence.

One important difference between what Montessori offers the five-year-old and what is offered by many of today's kindergarten programs has to do with how it helps the young child learn how to learn.

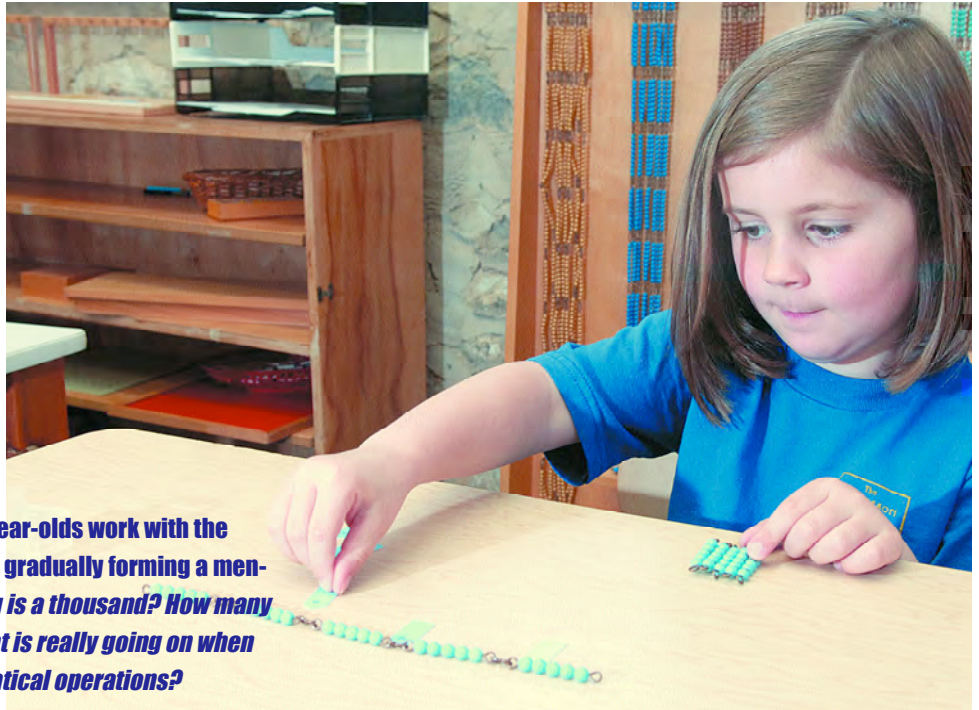
A great deal of research shows that, quite often, students in traditional programs don't really understand most of what they are being taught.

ty to take knowledge learned in one setting and apply it appropriately in a different setting. Study after study has found that, by and large, even the best students in the best schools can't do that." ("On Teaching For Understanding: A Conversation with Howard Gardner," by Ron Brandt, *Educational Leadership Magazine*, ASCD, 1994.)

The value of the sensorial experiences that the younger children have had in Montessori are often underestimated by both parents and educators. Research is very clear that young children learn by observing and manipulating their environment, not through textbooks and workbook exercises.

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In a primary classroom, three and four-year-olds work with the concrete Montessori learning materials, gradually forming a mental picture of concepts, such as: *How big is a thousand? How many hundreds make up a thousand? And what is really going on when we borrow or carry numbers in mathematical operations?*



As a “developmental” approach, Montessori is based on a realistic understanding of children’s cognitive, neurological, and emotional development.

Because Montessori teachers are developmentally trained, they normally know how to present information in an appropriate way.

What often happens in schools is that teachers are not developmentally trained and children are essentially filling in workbook pages with little understanding and do a great deal of rote learning. Superficially, it may appear that they have learned a lot, but the reality is that, most often, what they have learned was not meaningful to the child. A few months down the road, little of what they ‘learned’ will be retained and it will be rare for them to be able to use their knowledge and skills in new situations.

More and more educational researchers are beginning to focus on whether students, young or adult, really understand or have simply memorized correct answers.





Learning to be organized and learning to be focused is as important as any academic work. Doing worksheets quickly can be impressive to parents, but there is rarely any deep learning going on.

By the end of age five, Montessori students will often develop academic skills that may be beyond those advanced beyond those. Academic progress is not our ultimate goal. Our real hope is that they will feel good about themselves and enjoy learning. Mastering basic skills is a side goal.

The Montessori materials give the child concrete sensorial impressions of abstract concepts, such as long division, that become the foundation for a lifetime of understanding.

Montessori gives children a foundation for abstract understanding, but the process is anything but complete as they begin kindergarten. Two-, three-, and four-year-olds absorb impressions from the world around them like sponges. Their learning is generally unconscious.

Five-year-olds are beginning to reflect upon the world. They pay closer attention, notice more details, ask more questions, and begin to explain the world in their own terms. The kindergarten year is a time when the child begins to integrate everything she learned in the first few years.

Although many parents have heard, and on some level appreciate, that the years before first grade are the most important years in a child's education, decisions about a child's preschool and kindergarten often receive less objective analysis than goes into selecting a new car. There is a tendency to assume that the local schools are fundamentally good enough. In doing so, parents underestimate the amount of learning that takes place in the third year of Montessori.

Where Are They Now ...



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Have you ever heard the quote, "All I ever needed to know, I learned in kindergarten?" I've seen this quote many times before, and, as most people, I have read it as an innocuous statement of someone's judgment, dismissing it before ever really appreciating it. But, the other day, in an airport, I came across this statement. Before dismissing it, as I had previously, I actually took a moment to ponder the statement.

In a few cases, kindergarten Montessori children may not look as if they are not as advanced as a child in a very academically accelerated traditional program, but what they do know they usually know very well. Their understanding of the decimal system, place value, mathematical operations, and similar information is usually very sound. With reinforcement as they grow older, it becomes internalized and a permanent part of who they are. When they leave Montessori before they have had the time to internalize these early concrete experiences, their early learning often evaporates because it is neither reinforced nor commonly understood.

Montessori is an approach to working with children that is carefully based on what we've learned about child development from several decades of research.

By the end of kindergarten Montessori children are generally doing very well academically. Montessori offers them enriched lessons in math, reading, and language, and if they are ready, they normally develop excellent skills.

The key concept is readiness. If a child is developmentally not ready to go on, he or she is neither left behind nor made to feel like a failure. Our goal is not ensuring that children develop at a predetermined rate, but to ensure that whatever they do, they do well and master. Most Montessori children master a tremendous amount of information and skills, and even in the cases where children may not have made as much progress as we would have wished, they usually have done a good job with their

work, wherever they have progressed at any given point, and feel good about themselves as learners.

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What did I learn in kindergarten, and where was I when I was in kindergarten? I was sitting in Patti and Susan's class on a big taped circle singing, *Deep Blue Beluga*, taking naps in the afternoon, learning to share my mid-morning snack with other children, learning the art of tying my shoes taught by older children, even building big pink towers in an attempt to master the best plan to make it, successfully, stand taller each and every time. I remember the playground, and learning that there are different areas of the playground, divided by different children and different activities; but, there was a collectivism that was shared, in that we were invited and encouraged to participate in all of the groups and all of the activities. But, most of all, I remember Patti and Susan and appreciating that I could go to school every day, be welcomed with a hug, and dismissed back to my parents with a good-bye hug.

Twenty-one years later, I am still in the same place; however, Patti and Susan are not my teachers, but they are represented in any "authority" figures I meet, as they do not need to be feared, but can be appreciated. I still know how to share, and to appreciate the diversity that life offers. I recognize the gifts that people bring in their everyday personalities that allow me to learn from them—whether it's in teaching me how to tie my shoes (which I'm proud to say I've mastered), or in sharing with me something that's totally unique to them. I have

always internalized the desire to respect diversity not only in backgrounds, but in perspective as well. And, I appreciate that I am immersed in various different backgrounds equally, as I can learn and share with all, rather than be limited in my associations.

I am in graduate school for psychology, with one year left in this program. Many ask the scary question of: "What will you do when you're done?" But, I know the answer to this question, "I will go on. I will learn more. I will go to more school to achieve enough education that I can be and do what I want to in this world." It may be a lawyer, a writer, a psychologist, even a television personality—but, I respect that there is more for me to discover in myself for now. I take comfort that my education and my experiences will help lead the way.

Montessori provided me with the wonderful gift of appreciating learning—not just from books, but learning from within. It fostered in me the independence, the drive to excel and succeed in all that I do, and most importantly, the love and appreciation I have for myself in that I was taught to celebrate who I am and use my potentials as my very gifts in my everyday experience.

I can honestly say, that I have so much curiosity for life because I was given the opportunity, from a very young age, to question why things happen the way that they do. I was given the luxury to learn at my own pace, though still covering all of the material, to further excel and master the things that were more fitting to me. Essentially, I have carried that Montessori

experience with me through all of these years—learning all that is required of me, but really focusing on the most salient and stimulating things that are unique to me. My education, therefore, is not restricted to the classroom or books, but is omnipresent in all facets of life.

I am aware of how fortunate I am to be where I am and to have accomplished all that I have in my life. But, in reality, I have to thank my parents for having chosen Montessori. My teachers (from kindergarten and beyond), however, may have been my greatest asset for opening the doors of exploration, encouraging me to be confident in myself, and to have courage to learn, on so many levels, what life is about. I won't dismiss that quote anymore, as I once did. I will embrace it, appreciate it, and communicate this with others. If others' kindergarten experience can be as poignant, comforting, and stimulating as mine, we can make a huge difference in what we, as the next generations, can make of the future. After all, everything I ever needed to know, I really did learn in kindergarten.

If you are a former Montessori student or know someone who is, we'd love to hear from you to find out how Montessori affected your life. Contact Chelsea at tcmag@aol.com.