

Montessori or Kindergarten?

by Ann Messick

The decision have your 5-year-old child continue in a Montessori Children's House or move to a kindergarten class can be a challenging one. I would like to share some observations, insights from Maria Montessori, examples of the possibilities of work for these older children, and offer a few questions that may help you in this process. From my experience as a guide and as a parent, I believe strongly that a "complete" Montessori experience is a true foundation for life, and that the culminating or final year in a Children's House is essential to the completion of a purposeful continuum.

Maria Montessori was a careful and thoughtful observer of children. She created materials for the children's use that would aid them in their self-construction. She recognized that humans pass through planes of development, and within each plane there are certain general characteristics and basic needs. The Children's House is prepared for children from the ages of approximately 3 to 6 years, meaning that the materials and activities of the Children's House are designed specifically for the developmental needs of children in this complete age span. Children of this age have totally absorbent minds, which are drawn to certain activities by inner motivations called "sensitive periods." We know that 6 year olds are different in many ways than 3 year olds as they begin to evolve from their absorbent minds into conscious, reasoning minds. Therefore, the "work" is set up as a continuum.

The first couple years of the child's experience in the Children's House are laying a foundation. A child at three absorbs the order within the environment and begins to orient himself in this new place. He is able to begin exploring once he feels safe and secure in this caring community. He is exposed to a variety of work and develops the ability to focus his complete attention, and to love "his work." He develops friendships, and learns how to live in a community larger than his own family.

These first years are full of exploration and discovery; the development of basic skills, including coordination of large and small muscles and hand/eye coordination; and developing an internal sense of order through a sequence of activities. Children work for the pure love of work. They experience sounds, dimensions, shapes, textures, tastes, colors and relationships with their senses. They repeat pouring, spooning, scrubbing and washing in the process of perfecting their skills. They learn to identify and isolate the sounds in their language and the symbols that represent these sounds. They count and manipulate rods, spindles, tablets and counters, developing a sensorial concept of number and quantity. They explore maps, music, art and simple science projects.

All the while, they are living in a community of others who care for and respect one another. These younger children can ask for help from an older child in tying their apron, carrying their map, cleaning a spill, even learning how to use a piece of work. There is a spirit of nurturance, cooperation and interdependence amongst all the children. As the child returns each fall, confidence increases. The surroundings are familiar, most of the children are familiar. A feeling of security develops.

With this secure foundation, children in their final year begin to become aware of what they know; the building blocks can now be utilized for expanded intellectual and personal exploration. These children now have a special opportunity to be one of the oldest children in their community. Due to their increased confidence and competencies they are now one of the leaders and role models. They take on this role with grace and enthusiasm. In the past they have watched others, practiced, and even anticipated this role. Now we witness confidence, pride in work, empathy, understanding, compassion, respect for others, cooperation, self-discipline, responsibility, and independence.

This final year is truly an empowering year - a year of enhanced self-esteem. The early years in Montessori have been filled with many small successive successes; they've worked at their own pace and followed their interests, and error has been a friend. And now these children take on challenges (personally and academically) with self-assurance. During this culminating year, I have been so impressed with children's character development, their ability to live in and contribute to a peaceful community, and their "academic" achievements.

What distinct characteristics do we see in these older children? They are beginning to ask about the unseen, about causes, and they are listening to the answers. They are developing an interest in ethics, what is fair and what is right. They are interested in true stories about people who have made ethics their passion, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Mother Teresa. They are more social, able and wanting to work in groups to perform a play, create a quilt or organize a fundraising activity. Their peer relationships are more organized. They are becoming conscious of what they know. They are displaying physical and mental strength, wanting to challenge this growth. They are interested in the abstract; they are dealing with ideas. They are intrigued by the universe and inter-relatedness. They are interested in cultural anthropology and global geography. Our work with these older children helps them to become conscious of what they have learned in the previous years, and actually feeds their developing skills and interests.

These children will continue to work in all areas of the room, but often in different ways than before. They will now work to accomplish something, more for the satisfaction and delight of the end result. They will notice the needs of their community and respond with their refined skills - truly the essence of responsibility. They will often wash cloths, iron them, and return them for use in the community. They may be involved in the preparation of snack, in the serving of a guest, in the planning, preparations, and cooking for a special occasion. They have mastered the dressing frames, so they can help the younger children with their tying, buttoning, zipping. They also are applying the skills they have gained through use of the practical life materials to explore other areas, such as botanical study, science experiments, and explorations into geometry. They are giving lessons to the younger children, which not only nurtures the younger child, but also reinforces for the older children their own knowledge. What better way to strengthen one's own knowledge than to be able to teach it to another? These children can think ahead and plan what they will need to accomplish a goal that they have set for themselves. They can notice and analyze a sequence. Language is added to all that they do in labeling the materials and actions. Children return to the sensorial materials as "old friends" to work on particular skills. For example, if a child appears to be having difficulty writing, it may be that she is pressing too hard. She may need to refine her lightness of touch by using the touch tablets. We also add language to all the sensorial materials - colors, sounds, dimensions, geometric shapes and more. We can

hand a child a set of labels with certain qualities and ask him to find the work that has these qualities. The child will then work with the material and label it (such as long, longer, longest, short, shorter, and shortest with the red rods). We continually encourage children to expand their knowledge gained with the materials to the environment in the classroom, in the yard, and in their world. These children can create their own sensorial materials. They can make a poster of the four cylinder blocks, the pink tower, the brown stair. They can create the geometric solids out of clay or sew pillows in geometric shapes. This sensorial grounding becomes the source for children's burgeoning imaginations.

The older children's artwork often becomes more realistic, and is now often used to illustrate a story, poem or report they have written. Children create and publish their own books. The media available to them expands beyond the basics to blending pastels, creating cultural collages and nature collages around a theme. Music is taken to another level with their own compositions using the bells. They often play their songs for the children who are walking on the line. These children are beginning to enter a new developmental period that we call "the acquisition of culture." They are seeing the world with new eyes, and thus we offer them opportunities to quench their thirst for knowledge. These children investigate botany and zoology, which are both connected to geography. Their geography work moves beyond sensorially working with maps, to establishing projects about countries, indigenous animals, and people and their culture (cultural anthropology - how people all over the world meet the same basic needs and how these methods differ according to climate, resources, technology). Because this is an open-ended continuum, children can explore as far or as in depth as their interest takes them, and in the process continue to develop personal and academic skills.

Maria Montessori described children's emergence into both writing and reading as an "explosion." Once the groundwork has been laid, children seem to write and read overnight! The opening of a whole new world follows these "explosions". The older children use their ability with the moveable alphabet to compose lists around a theme, to explore compound words, homonyms, rhymes, contractions, to write stories about their experiences and poems inspired by these experiences, and to create reports and stories based on their readings and imagination. As stated earlier, everything in the environment is labeled with increasing precision - at first just nouns, then articles and nouns, then articles, adjectives and nouns. Sets of classified cards that have previously been used for vocabulary enrichment now have labels and control cards so the children can check themselves. Definition booklets offer children opportunities to further explore areas of interest.

Children's reading moves beyond phonetically spelled words to the study of phonograms (two letters together which produce a sound, such as sh, th, oo) and to what we call "puzzle words" (irregularly constructed words, such as to, one and of). The study of the functions of different words is great fun as the children use "the farm" to discover that adjectives help us to describe the animals (nouns). Each part of speech is introduced with an activity, such as tying objects together for conjunctions and placing items in different places for prepositions. They are presented in the same order that children naturally acquire language. Verbs become commands for action, which can then be modified with adverbs. Symbols are given to each part of speech, and with time the children are able to recognize and appreciate different styles of writing, such as an author's use of adjectives or action words. We write sentences for the children to act out and

then analyze. This increases in complexity with the child's interest and ability until he is diagramming sentences. A true love of reading and writing can be fostered through this progression.

The older children's work with the mathematical materials is moving from concrete experiences of quantity, symbol, and operations (addition and subtraction) to more abstract work. Beyond the sensorial experience of holding a unit bead or a thousand cube, a child can add, subtract, multiply and divide with small square tiles called "stamps." The stamps no longer need to demonstrate the sensorial impression of quantity, for the child has a clear feeling for these numbers. These stamps differ only by color and are imprinted with their quantity (" 1 ", "10", "100", "1000"). This work can be further abstracted to the "dot game," in which dots in certain columns now represent qualities, and to the small and large bead frames (abacus). Children practice mathematical operations with small strips and beads and charts, internalizing the process as well as beginning to log into their memory many of the essential combinations. They ultimately can test their memory with a blank chart upon which they place the answers to their equations. Children will count chains that are the cubes of numbers, work with the calendar, clock, weights and measurements. They explore the fraction insets, identifying quantities and substituting pieces while discovering equivalencies, as well as performing basic operations of addition and subtraction. Children use their understanding of the math materials to solve story problems, connected to real life activity, such as the number of houses still without power after a storm, the perimeter and area of our classroom, or how many crackers each child will receive if we share a large quantity equally. This continuum offers children a solid framework for further exploration of mathematical concepts.

Knowing now what is available to the older children in a Montessori Children's House, I encourage you to observe both at the Children's House and in a kindergarten class. While watching the older children, ask yourself these questions:

- In what activities are these children involved?
- What is the level of work of the older children?
- Do you notice interest, concentration, cooperation, joy in the children's work?
- How do these children interact with others?
- Do you see examples of leadership, confidence, responsibility, independence?

Then, talk with your child's guide regarding your child's specific needs and interests, and you will surely come to the decision best suited for your child. The final year in the Children's House is like running a marathon after years of training; it is the much-anticipated ending of a good book; it is harvesting the fruit of the garden. If you choose to keep your child in the Children's House, he will reap the benefits for many years to come.

Ann Messick worked for a total of 30 years at West Hills Montessori School and SunGarden Montessori Children's House, beginning as an assistant, treasuring her time as a guide, and completing her career as an administrator.