

Montessori a child-centered alternative

By Kimberly Tolley

Spring is the time when parents typically begin researching and making decisions about their children's education for the coming fall. Perhaps you aren't satisfied with your child's current day care situation. Maybe you are looking for a terrific preschool program in your area. Or, if your child hasn't been thriving in his/her elementary school, you might even be wondering what other options exist.

If the prospect of homeschooling seems overwhelming to you and you aren't completely satisfied with what the local public school system has to offer your child, you may want to consider Montessori education as both a viable and desirable alternative.

The Montessori approach is far different from the more traditional means of education and learning. At its most basic, Montessori learning is child-centered, while traditional learning is teacher centered. Whereas in a traditional learning environment, the teacher controls all aspects of the class from where to sit, what to study, and when to study it, the Montessori "teacher" acts more as a guide, creating a path of learning in a very "prepared" environment enabling the child to discover and learn at his/her own pace.

The Montessori classroom is quite a departure from more traditional classrooms. Tables, chairs, and floor mats (rather than desks) are small enough for the children to sit comfortably, working alone or in small groups, and all the decorations and pictures are placed at child's eye level. During the course of the day, children have full access to all the materials, which are placed on open shelves and grouped by area of learning: practical life, sensorial, science, geography, reading, math, language arts, culture, etc.

The materials themselves are appealing, interesting and self correcting. Children "learn by doing". Rather than have the teacher point out the "correct" way to learn a concept, the materials allow the children to make the discovery themselves. As each new



Montessori students learn about geography.

task is built upon a skill that the child has already mastered, the child develops self confidence by building on a series of carefully planned successes. There is nothing more gratifying than to have a child proudly exclaim, "Look! I did this all by myself!"

There exists a natural sense of discipline in a Montessori classroom. Expectations and ground rules for working in the classroom are clearly stated at the beginning of the year and will likely be enforced by the children, as well as the teacher. Children are quiet by choice and out of respect for the others in the room. Because there is a three year age span of children within a Montessori classroom, the older children help teach the younger children, model the classroom norms, and build a stronger sense of community.

Unlike traditional classrooms, group learning and activities in a Montessori environment are not mandated, but are voluntary and negotiable. Because Montessori lessons are designed for individualized learning, a child feels no pressure to keep up with the other

children in the classroom and can freely learn at his/her own pace making it ideally suited for both gifted and challenged students. All the learning activities are geared to varying needs and levels of readiness, allowing each child to engage in a task that sparks an interest with him/her. Consequently, the child begins to build a positive attitude towards the process of learning itself. While fostering a life-long love of learning and promoting curiosity about the world around us, the primary goal of a Montessori program is to help each child reach his/her full potential in all areas of life. It allows the child to develop self discipline, persistence, independence, concentration, and fosters decision making, respect for others and for the environment.

If you'd like to find out more about a "Montessori alternative" in your area, please contact the Damariscotta Montessori School at 563-2168 or visit www.damariscottamontessori.org. Classroom tours are available.

(Kimberley Tolley is a Montessori parent and certified Montessori preschool teacher.)