

What, No Briefcase? Montessori and Paperwork

Edward Fidellow
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Montessori parents are often bewildered by the lack of paperwork coming home with their child. There's hardly any! So what does my child do all day? What can he be possibly learning?

For most of us our school experience was a blizzard of paper work - spaces to fill in, lines to write, dots to connect. Pages upon pages of busy work that hopefully conveyed to parents that we were learning. Much of it was redundant, boring and the waste of a good tree! But that was the measure for parents that learning was happening.

You've now entered a new universe when you chose a Montessori program. You didn't choose Montessori because it resembled your learning experience but because it represented the learning experience you wished you'd been privileged to have. When you visit the environment your eyes feast on amazing materials - colors, shapes, complexities. Is this material really for my three year old or four year old - isosceles triangles, quatrefoils, reniform leaf shapes? Does he really touch it and feel it and use it? But when there is no paper trail coming home, you wonder!

Socrates said, "There is nothing in the mind that is not first in the hands." And it is the touching of these concrete materials that begins the building of the mental processes in your child. Traditional education begins with intellectual development hoping to make the abstract concrete. Montessori education begins with the development and refining of the senses, allowing your child to build this concrete knowledge one step at a time until he is ready and poised to make the great intellectual leap into the abstract. In Montessori education, it is the child's own developmental timetable that causes this explosion of solid (and unprecedented) learning to occur. It is not an artificial timetable based on age or calendar but a continual cultivation and development of the child's growing intellectual power that is being fed day by day in a manner that allows your child to appropriate and practice the tools and skills that will form his intellectual abilities for a lifetime.

All this time the child is building within himself this intellectual capability. Montessori education is very much like the construction of a jetty. Rock after rock is submerged in the water, seemingly lost beneath the surface but then the day comes when the latest rocks begin to become visible and break the water's plane. Your child is building a very concrete foundation for all further intellectual development one achievement at a time.

These processes and achievements, in many ways, are very private for your child. Your child often doesn't speak of them - or want to speak of them until after (sometimes long after) they have become operative and well established in your child. It is not that they want to exclude you from their developmental journey but they guard it - not jealously - but protectively, as if speaking about it would jeopardize its development.

This is why your best ally in understanding your child's development and progress is the teacher and not random pieces of paper that wend their way home. The teacher is a good guide to share with you your child's progress because much of what the teacher does in the classroom is to observe and document this progress. Montessori education is never just a question of teaching or presenting materials but of presenting and teaching at the appropriate time and in the appropriate way. Each child has a different learning style - one size doesn't fit all. And it is this different learning style of your child that is celebrated and used to your child's advantage in the learning process.

It is not so much what is put into your child that creates this tremendous Montessori learning explosion but what comes out of your child - out from their personality, their talents, gifts, and temperament. Montessori is about aligning learning with the way your child learns. There may not be another time in his life where the whole world is bent to give him every advantage and opportunity to learn as quickly and as effortlessly as possible.

Every day your child is absorbing the whole world around him trying to make sense of it, trying to master the parts he can. And it is in his Montessori classroom that this world is made tangible and accessible. He can't always tell you when he is going to make the discoveries that will propel him on to new and even more exciting discoveries. ("Did you know that three times two is the same as two times three? The windows are rectangles and so are the tables.") Instead of being given the answers - which he would be expected to put down on paper - which could go home; he is given the questions and allowed to discover the answers for himself. This joy of discovery is hard to put on paper.

There are two ways better than paper to know what your child is learning. Ask his teacher. She has the great joy of daily watching the discoveries light up your child's eyes, of watching your child work the challenges of learning and the joy that comes to your child from mastery. She is watching the emergence of your child's personality, watching his character form and his intellect develop. When you are talking with the teacher listen to the excitement of her voice as she relates your child's progress and read in her eyes the joy she shares in your child's discoveries and accomplishments. Much better than paperwork.

Second, ask your child. But don't ask him what he learned today - he may not be able to tell you (and it still may be private but he'll share with you when he is ready.) Ask him what he sees out of the window. He may just read the street signs to you (which isn't bad for a three year old.) Ask him about his friends. Ask him about colors or dinosaurs or cars - and then listen. He will tell you all kinds of things. He will use all kinds of words - vocabulary and concepts you didn't even know he knew. And if you keep listening you'll learn not only what he learned but you will set a pattern for conversation and discussion that will take you well beyond the teenage years - much more satisfying and important than paperwork.