MONTESSORI PRINCIPLES and PHILOSOPHY February 2, 2012

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True to Montessori form, two fundamental principles of Montessori education follow an overarching idea from the concrete to the abstract: the first is ***freedom*** and the second is the ***environment*.**   
My reason for choosing to follow the Montessori path is that it follows natural laws that are in tune with who I am. It gives me great joy to work alongside the boundless energy of children, and to wrap myself in the meaningful endeavor of service to humanity. I am a natural, kinesthetic and visual learner. Montessori philosophy and methods endorse a natural environment, integrate freedom of motion, and harness sensorial means, including visual, into purposeful learning. I respect the free will of *all* people. I value creativity, self-discovery, while guiding toward collaborative and independent, critical thinking. When paired with an open, respectful and socially responsible environment that recognizes and supports where students are developmentally, I see self-confidence grow, inner discipline flourish, and proud choices   
being made in preparing children to enter the world.

**FREEDOM**

There is no more powerful, intrinsic, motivating force than the fulfillment of one’s free will.   
A Montessori classroom provides the opportunity to **unfold the child’s true self,** by enabling their **freedom of choice.** Activity may be sustained for minutes, days or even a week at a time, as the child learns through repetition and self-motivated interest. Lillard (1972) elaborates, “The children in the Montessori class are given the freedom that is the liberty of the human being, and this freedom allows the children to grow in social grace, inner discipline, and joy.”1 It is the **child’s right to self-discover.** Lillard (1972) further explains, a teacher who reveals more than the basic idea, will “rob him of the joy of creativity that should have been his.” 2 Indeed, this sense of discovery, is the child’s sacred moment of learning.

A result of this freedom is **serious concentration that leaves an imprint of satisfaction,** **accomplishment and peace.** After all that effort and hard work a child may feel remarkably rested.   
I wonder, is inner-discipline simply an awareness to follow free will? All people are free to regulate their behavior and to choose conscious control over their life. Normalization of the child is achieved through self-regulated behavior. This is an empowering and liberating idea! When the child chooses what he/she wishes to work on, there is no doubt they are actively engaged with greater concentration and for longer periods of time. Their reward is intrinsic. They appreciate the process of learning and not necessarily the product. They relish autonomy of their own decision-making. Of note, it is the teacher’s role to prepare a developmentally appropriate environment that encourages the child’s freedom of choice with limits.

Promoting brain development, **freedom of movement** is intimately connected with learning. Montessori (1966) forewarns, “Man who does not move is injured in his very being and is an outcast   
from life.” 3  (forward). How can we participate with others if we fail to interact and move? I enjoy   
seeing freedom of kinesthetic motion routinely integrated into Montessori practice. Golden beads,   
red rods, and sand paper letters are a few such examples. Effective teaching welcomes the child’s   
free will a uses all of our senses.

**Social freedom** is witnessed in the support that **mixed aged classrooms** extend to each other. With a 1/3 ratio, most Montessori classrooms have an equal number of children, each one-year apart, spanning a total of 3 years. Growing out of a sense of responsibility for the order and care of their classroom, children become responsible for each other. It seems humanity has a natural desire to be helpful, and no other educator is more powerful than a peer. Because peers can relate, express and teach in the same language and at a similar developmental level, they are easily understand each other. Lillard (1972) continues to shine light on the social relations within a Montessori classroom, “Through this freedom, the child’s natural interest in others and desire to help them grow spontaneously.” 4 (p.75). It is through collaborative, (and not competitive) social relationships that the older children inspire the younger children to learn. According to Maria Montessori (1957), “Teaching helps him to understand what he knows even better than before.” 5  (p. 26). While nurturing another human being, they break apart, analyze, and reorder their thinking as they become teachers themselves. Naturally, deeper learning is taking place.

**ENVIRONMENT**

A Montessori classroom environment holds several key concepts for creative young minds to flourish. These include **freedom, order, reality, beauty, materials and community**. Freedom of choice provides the opportunity to lift a child’s independence. It is the child’s free will to choose which material to work with and for how long. It is not the adult’s role to interfere and perform acts that the child may learn to do for himself. A Montessori teacher protects the child’s choice and creates an environment for constructive work to surface. Montessori children are not forced to join group activities or compete with other students if they are not developmentally ready to show interest for that particular task. As a result,   
this non-competitive environment gives rise to a natural human desire to help others.

**Sequentially ordered** across all content areas from easiest to most challenging, a Montessori environment is arranged from top to bottom and left to right. While appearing quite linear at first, this structure is extremely fluid as children move their bodies in and out, repeating the same works until fulfilled. Consequently, the child learns to trust the environment and interact positively with the materials. Importantly, the child is an *integral* part of this classroom structure. Students work diligently to maintain order when they return a work to its’ proper location, thereby completing a work cycle.

Understanding the **limits of reality** and nature help students assign meaning to their new world and to separate the illusions and imaginative fantasy of role-play. Through contact with nature, inside and outside the classroom, children grow to appreciate order, harmony and beauty. Activities that are rich in natural content help the child to feel secure, maintain a sense of place, and feel free to observe and appreciate life with exceptional detail. In addition, caring for living plants or animals helps children to coexist and live in awe of the natural world.

**Beautiful** Montessori **environments** typically include ample light, warm colors, glass walls, open space, and an inviting, relaxing atmosphere exhibiting high quality materials. Quality, in fact, permeates many aspects of this space. Well-designed activities of wood, metal, and natural elements encourage the child to treat the environment with care and to recognize that learning can be a sacred experience. Harmoniously arranged in ordered shelves, these activities invite participation.

Because many tasks in a Montessori environment are independent, the **materials** are designed to **capture attention**, promote **self-construction** and **concentration**. Through observation, a teacher may realize the child’s level of intensity and interest. Is this work meaningful? Is it at an appropriate level?   
Is it consistent with the child’s internal needs?

Lillard explains further (1972), “The teacher watches for a quality of concentration   
in the child and for a spontaneous repetition of his actions with a material. These responses   
will indicate the meaningfulness of the material to him at that particular moment in his growth   
and whether the intensity of the stimulus which that material represents for him is also   
matched to his internal needs.”6 (p. 60).

Clearly, when there is a quality of concentration, learning is most meaningful. Learning is suited to a particular stage of mental growth and matched to internal needs. Moreover, the child feels pleased with his/her accomplishment, peaceful and rested. In addition, the teacher should be flexible to alter the sequence or omit activities that the child shows no need for. At times, it is possible for a child to learn simply by observing another child, and to leapfrog activities.

A Montessori environment is **a true community.** Modeling respectful social behavior, people come to care for each other, solve problems together and consider the greater good of the group. Sitting beside a student and not only listening, but also hearing what they have to say, is a vital life skill for individuals. In this community, children learn to make choices that everyone can agree with.

**DISCIPLINE**

If students respect themselves, others and the environment, they should experience a relaxing atmosphere of actively engaged learning. However, as children are learning on numerous levels, this is not always the case. Approaching discipline with explicit language that follows clear expectations, I proactively encourage children to problem solve independently with guidance. When needed, I discipline using the three R’s: Is the corrective action towards the desired appropriate behavior *respectful, relevant*, and *reasonable*? Sitting at the peace table for a number of minutes that matches the child’s age is a respectful way to ensure that one student does not interfere with the learning of others. Especially important, while using a peace rose, is the conflict resolution skills and dialogue that follow. Removing a privilege, a call home, losing outside time, and a visit to the office are other methods of action only if it is relevant to the offense. Discipline should be reasonable as kids are learning and making mistakes all of the time. Reasonable discipline teaches forgiveness, helps children feel safe in their environment, and offers freedom to explore and learn without artificial rewards or punishments.

**REFERENCES**

1 - Montessori, Maria, (1966). The Secret of Childhood. The Ballantine Publishing Group., p. 103.

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4 - Lillard, Paula Polk, (1972). Montessori A Modern Approach. Schocken Books Inc., p. 75.

5 - Montessori, Maria, (1957). The Absorbent Mind. Buccaneer Books Inc., p. 26.

6 - Lillard, Paula Polk, (1972). Montessori A Modern Approach. Schocken Books Inc., p. 60.