

Planes of Development and Psychological Characteristics

In 1935, in Edinburgh, Scotland, Doctor Montessori specified the **four planes of development**. She observed children of different ages, guided by her background as a doctor, scientist, and anthropologist, and observed the whole; Dr. Montessori saw that in each plane, children had vastly different needs, and there were different manifestations of the human being. Her conclusion was that the human being passed through different phases as she constructed the person she was to become.

With this in mind, Doctor Montessori suggested that we divide education according to the planes of development: zero to six years, six to twelve years, twelve to eighteen years, and eighteen to twenty four years. Of course that doesn't mean that exactly on the child's sixth birthday he moves from one plane to the next - or when he is exactly twelve, he moves into the next plane. This maturation varies from child to child; for some it comes earlier, for some it comes later, but when it comes, if we are aware of the characteristics of each plane, we will know it when we see it. This is one of the reasons why Doctor Montessori advocated open classrooms. She wanted the children to move naturally from the primary to the elementary and from the elementary back to the primary. There should be a flow, so that when the child feels completely comfortable in the elementary, he can just remain in that classroom. At Cornerstone, we are increasingly able to embrace this method as well, with some children who are ready visiting from primary to elementary much of the second part of the academic year.

Doctor Montessori believed, then, that the task of education could not follow along a straight line. The process of education must take into consideration, and be in accord with, the psychological characteristics of each plane. This means that **education should concern itself with the psychology of the child rather than with a curriculum.**

Historically and for a long time, not enough attention had been given to early childhood education; the 'important' schooling started at six years of age and then became especially intense in middle and high school. Dr. Montessori discovered what science is just recently confirming: the profound importance of high quality education in a child's earliest years! Approaching education for children in the first plane with intention and excellence is critical when you think of the tremendous growth and change that takes place in a child's first six years! This then builds a foundation for the elementary child; the child in the second plane. Children in the second plane have an immense capacity for rigorous academics. In fact, at no other stage of development are our brains as capable. So we, as Montessorians, let the planes of development and the

psychological characteristics of each plane serve as our guide, rather than dictating to the children what they need to know and how much they need to know based on curricula and systems designed with no regard for the one it seeks to educate.

With the child in mind, we pay attention to five key points:

- the child's developmental characteristics
- the prepared environment
- the materials and activities of the environment
- the work of the children
- the role of the adult

The implementation of these five components changes from plane to plane, meaning that the approach and environment are very different for children in different planes.

The first six years of life are a fundamental developmental period as this is when the child is building up basic human characteristics, such as language and movement. The First Plane child has a mind that is absorbent in how the child takes in all of his or her environment through sensorial impressions. Aided by sensitive periods which highlight certain aspects of the environment such as language and order and support the refinement of movement and sensorial perception, the absorbent mind is a creative gift through which the child takes in the sensorial impressions she receives and creates herself, building fundamental human characteristics including intelligence, will, and character. As the child is building these fundamental "mental muscles" the child needs contact with reality in this plane as it allows her to build herself into a person of her place and time. The first plane child is largely content to work independently of others as it is through spontaneous activity or individual work that the child self-constructs. As the child repeatedly explores and manipulates, concentration ensues, and through this purposeful work, the child develops independence, intellect, will and memory.

The Second Plane Child has a completely different mind. Growing from the strong foundation of literally absorbing all the environment has to offer, we see a reasoning mind emerge sometime around six years of age. Asking an elementary child a question over which she can ponder, reason, and search for answers is like 'priming a little pump' in terms of igniting interest in learning. The second plane child needs less external order (as you might notice by the way she keeps her room!) and instead has an insatiable desire to create internal order; to seek understanding and organize it all in her mind. Second plane children move from being

completely at peace working alone to being driven to work with peers; big work and group work are always part of Montessori elementary environments. Second Plane children have a powerful sense of justice and budding morality as well as a very strong tendency to emulate a hero making it a very important time to tell stories of people with strong character as well as involve the children in every aspect of the systems of justice that govern their school and home environments. In contrast to the absorbent mind of the younger children, elementary children are ready to imagine that which they have not yet seen and seek answers to their many curiosities!

The other four components, then, are adjusted to directly foster or 'tap into' the characteristics of the children in that environment. In Children's House, the *prepared environment* is meticulously ordered. Each activity is prepared and arranged as a set, often color-coordinated and always beautiful and enticing. Tables are small and individual because the work of the child this age is largely individual. Shelves are low and are purposely limited in content with the principles of beauty, simplicity and order. Everything is sized appropriately so small people can be independent. In Elementary, the environment is also ordered with attention on beauty and simplicity, though it is ordered to support the child's reasoning mind; to help the child see sequence and categorize and classify information. Work is not placed as a set as in Children's House; instead the elementary child must reason through each item he needs and gather supplies to carry out his work and activities. Everything is slightly bigger, sized for older children; the tables are chosen purposely for seating groups of children and as a space to support big group work. *The work of the children* in Children's House is practicing, repeating as much as desired, the work as it was presented by their guide so the child can absorb and internalize the concepts. In elementary the presentation is most often a starting point for the child's work. The presentations are given to inspire interest and ignite desire to find out more. Though there is *work with and on the materials*, much of the work extends beyond the material in a way the child finds interesting such as poster or book making, models, dioramas, trips out into the community and on and on.

The role of the adult in all environments is to inspire a love of work and to connect the child to the environment that fosters healthy holistic development. Guides specifically prepare these environments to foster the development of character, independence, and advanced collaborative skills. Thus Montessori children are expected to respectfully move about the room, communicate opinions, and work in groups when appropriate, creating an environment in which there are endless opportunities to practice, early-on and daily, the very skills we expect them to use as responsible, respected and productive adult members of society. In Children's House it is done with the knowledge of the absorbent mind

and the sensitive periods for language and movement. In Elementary it is done with the knowledge of the child's reasoning mind and powerful sense of justice. Socially, children of all ages learn that all have strengths and all have struggles. Every child comes to realize, through repeated interactions and experiences with others in the community, that he or she has something important to offer. Setbacks and disappointments are dealt with as a community in a supportive, respectful, and nurturing way. As the community develops, children spontaneously address issues and show us daily, their immense capacity for compassion.

Children being guided in an authentic Montessori environment in these ways believe in themselves as capable people and as important members of society. Children who believe in themselves in these ways have an enormous capacity to excel academically, and it is these children who thrive on the inspiring and rigorous academics AMI classrooms are known for. In addition, the long-term goal of children leaving the program and taking their exceptional citizenship skills, sound self-esteem, and positive attitude towards learning has profound implications for their success in future educational settings and in society as a whole.