

Montessori vs. Traditional Elementary Programs: Some Differences

Montessori

1. The “prepared environment”, a classroom planned in advance to support independent, learner-initiated project work.
2. Flexibly defined grade levels within a developmental range: 0-3, 3-6, 6-9, 9-12, 12-15, 15-18 years of age.
3. The children acquire knowledge by themselves by working on hands-on projects and reflecting. The children actively discover information.
4. The curriculum expands in response to students’ needs in each development stage. There is as little “departmentalization” as possible.
5. Each child consults with his teacher to negotiate a unique path through the curriculum.
6. Emphasis on personal, one-to-one relationships between each child and the teacher.
7. Each child participates in creating significant portions of his own work. Each child engages in individual and paired research projects beginning in first grade. This enhances the child’s motivation to work with and go beyond the hands-on project materials.
8. The child works as long as he needs to during extended periods of uninterrupted workshop time. The teacher is present to act as a consultant and facilitator.
9. The child works on projects, and uses the teacher as a consultant who helps him to reach his own goals.
10. The child reinforces his knowledge by working repeatedly on logically connected projects in order to satisfy his curiosity, and in order to build his own sense of competence.
11. The child’s rhythm of work is accepted and encouraged. Self-esteem is assumed to arise from children’s authentic pride in their own accomplishments.
12. Each child discovers mistakes through feedback given by the project materials rather than by the teacher. The teacher avoids pointing out mistakes in favor of self-evaluation by each child. Instead of judging and correcting, the teacher advises the use of different complementary project materials, or “teaches again,” presenting a material from a different angle.
13. Freedom of movement. Communication based on mutual respect. Children learn to speak appropriately.
14. A daily balance of individual project work, small-group cooperative work, small-group lessons, and large-group lessons.
15. Social interaction within the classroom within the context of children’s normal academic work time.
16. A well articulated, hands-on science-based curriculum which integrates math, language arts, and the creative arts in a meaningful way. A curriculum intended to foster personal insights and moral awareness.
17. Each child knows that he has the opportunity to carry his study far beyond the reaches of the teacher’s own knowledge.

Traditional

1. A space suited for lectures and other teacher-centered activities
2. Grade levels strictly defined according to 12-month increments in chronological age.
3. The teacher provides information orally and requires children to memorize and be tested on such information. The children need to be passive.
4. The curriculum follows a strictly scheduled yearly program organized according to subject areas. Subject areas are “departmentalized” as soon as possible.
5. The teacher determines what the children must know, and in what order it must be covered. The children are not involved.
6. Emphasis on the teacher as the source of knowledge and the primary authority for a group.
7. The teacher assigns work which the teacher prepares, usually without consulting the children. The idea of research is introduced in seventh or eighth grade when children are taught how to write term papers.
8. The child has arbitrarily limited periods of time during which the child is presented with information. Practice time is largely deferred to homework time during which the teacher cannot be present.
9. The child focuses on memorization and focuses on the teacher as an authority who judges performance by exterior standards.
10. Learning is the result of external compulsion based on rewards and punishments.
11. The children are expected to follow the pace of the group. Self-esteem is assumed to arise from external judgment and reward.
12. The teacher judges and corrects directly and frequently. The teacher has the answer book; the teacher is the final authority.
13. The children are expected to move and speak only when the teacher gives permission to do so. Movement and communication are based on external authority.
14. Children are usually handled in large groups.
15. Strict segregation of academic work from social interaction, which is confined to the hallways, lunchroom, and playground.
16. Focus on the Three R’s, mostly out of context. A curriculum of mostly disconnected notions, categorized according to subject area.
17. The teacher has the answer book. The teacher is the final authority.