

The Assistant In A Montessori Classroom

Key Points:

- Assistants are key to ensuring that the complex learning environment is prepared for children.
- Assistants enable Montessori teachers to focus on instruction without interruption.
- The assistant's broad awareness and scanning of the environment not only protects the teacher's lessons but also assures that observational data are being gathered continuously, students are navigating the environment appropriately, and concentration is honored.
- The teacher and assistant's interactions offer a constant model of grace and courtesy for students to emulate, something not possible with only one adult present.

In conventional schools, students are grouped by grade and are taught by a single classroom teacher. In Montessori schools, however, students are grouped by three-year age spans (i.e., 3-6 years old, 6-9 years old, 9-12 years old), and require two teachers: a Montessori trained lead teacher and an assistant. Having a lead Montessori trained teacher and an assistant is vital to ensuring fidelity of implementation of the Montessori pedagogy, which in turn fosters the students' executive functions.

Fidelity of Implementation

In a fully implemented Montessori classroom, the teacher's most important task is to prepare an environment rich in developmental activities and to offer students individualized instruction. To ensure this fidelity of implementation of the Montessori pedagogy, an assistant is necessary to help prepare the environment, observe and record student behaviors, support procedural autonomy, protect student concentration, and model grace and courtesy. It is simply not possible for a lead Montessori teacher to do all of these things while offering individual and small group lessons. These role designations are often referred to as "one up, one down," reflecting the respective foci of the assistant and the teacher.

Preparation of the environment. Montessori classrooms are carefully prepared learning environments, requiring great attention to detail. The shelves, which are organized by subject, must be kept orderly. Materials used daily need constant replenishing. The hundreds of hands-on materials in Montessori classrooms necessitate the help of an assistant to prepare and maintain the environment so that students can practice their lessons and engage in self-initiated projects.¹

Observation. Maria Montessori developed her educational method through systematic observation of children, and observation remains central to assessing the needs of Montessori students.² Specifically, observation in a Montessori context provides quantitative data for individual students and the class as a whole. However, a lead teacher has limited time to observe given the time required for instruction. An assistant acts as a "second set of eyes," identifying and recording each student's activity and his or her level and duration of engagement. These data enable the lead teacher to identify the ebb and flow of a student's work cycle as well as patterns in learning and demonstrated need.¹ All of this information is necessary for highly targeted and individualized student lesson planning and for developing effective classroom management practices and procedures.

Procedural autonomy support. For a Montessori classroom to run smoothly and for students to independently navigate the environment, procedures must be determined, implemented, and followed. The multitude of procedures could involve academic work, such as steps for proposing a research project, as well as classroom management procedures, such as when and how students can make class announcements. An assistant is necessary to ensure procedures are followed so that students can move through the environment independently and the classroom can run effectively, leaving the teacher free to give students lessons.³

This brief was prepared for NCMPS by Laura Flores Shaw, the founder and Editor-in-Chief of White Paper Press, a think tank specializing in translating scientific research into terms that allows people to make informed decisions about education and human development. For more information on the scientific basis of Montessori education visit <http://www.whitepaperpress.us>

Recommended citation: National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector (2015), The Assistant in the Montessori Classroom. West Hartford, CT: National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector.

Protection of student concentration. The process by which a child becomes self-regulated in their learning and other behaviors – what Montessori called “normalization” – occurs through concentration with self-chosen, hands-on materials.⁴ Through concentration neurons fire and wire together, reinforcing the neuronal pathways of the brain’s central executive region,⁵ the region responsible for executive functions (EFs) – cognitive skills that enable attentional focus, planning, self-regulation, and multitasking.⁶ As neuroscientist Adele Diamond states, “What Montessorians mean by ‘normalization’ includes having good EFs” (p. 961).⁷ Thus, adults must, as Montessori trainer Dr. Annette Haines states, “protect the child who is concentrating.”⁸ If the classroom environment is disruptive and does not allow opportunities for deep concentration, the pedagogy is not being implemented as designed and EFs development is hindered. In the Montessori classroom, with her upward gaze and broad overview of the room, the assistant is a diligent protector of student concentration.

Grace and courtesy. Grace and courtesy is an essential component of the Montessori curriculum that supports students’ executive functions, academic growth, and social development. These lessons, which are provided to the entire class or a small group, enable students to act out various social situations (e.g., introducing oneself to a new classmate) or movements within the classroom (e.g., how to carefully return work to the shelf). Students’ social development is supported through this social situation practice, enabling students to eventually navigate those situations independently and effectively.⁹ Students’ executive functions are built through this precise practice of impulse control and deliberate action, which contributes to students’ academic growth.¹⁰

Adults support the practice of grace and courtesy through modeling and, when necessary, scaffolding. As the teacher and assistant interact with one another, they must consistently model grace and courtesy so that students can see how these behaviors are enacted among members of the entire community.¹¹ Scaffolding, in the form of direct reminders or cues, may also be necessary. For instance, students involved in a conflict over a project may need to be reminded to actively listen to one another; or a student may need to be reminded how to navigate the classroom without stepping on others’ work. A single teacher in the classroom cannot model adult-to-adult interaction, nor can that teacher consistently provide the necessary scaffolding of students’ own grace and courtesy behaviors throughout the day.

Conclusion

Montessori pedagogy and the scholarly research as described herein demonstrate the necessity of an assistant in a Montessori classroom to ensure faithful implementation of the Montessori pedagogy, which, in turn, fosters students’ executive functions and social and emotional development.

Notes

¹ Haines, A. (2000). The role of the teacher and the role of the assistant. Paper presented at the Freedom & Responsibility: A Glorious Counterpoint, Boston, MA.

² Montessori, M. (2013). *The Montessori method*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

³ Koh, J. H. L., & Frick, T. W. (2010). Implementing autonomy support: Insights from a Montessori classroom. *International Journal of Education*, 2(2:E3), 1-15.

⁴ Montessori, M. (1967). *The absorbent mind* (1st ed.). New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

⁵ Yuste, R. (1992). Cells that fire together, wire together. *Journal of NIH Research*, 4, 60-60.

⁶ Anderson, P. (2002). Assessment and development of executive function (EF) during childhood. *Child Neuropsychology*, 8(2), 71.

Diamond, A. (2013). Executive Functions. *Annual Review Psychology*, 64, 135-168.

⁷ Diamond, A., & Lee, K. (2011). Interventions shown to aid executive function development in children 4 to 12 years old. *Science*, 333(6045), 959-964. doi: 10.1126/science.1204529

⁸ Haines, 2000.

⁹ Haines, 2000.

¹⁰ Diamond, A., & Lee, K. (2011). Interventions shown to aid executive function development in children 4 to 12 years old. *Science*, 333(6045), 959-964. doi: 10.1126/science.1204529

¹¹ Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.