

Practice makes perfect



Learning to write requires children to hone a number of skills, and Montessori classrooms offer them numerous opportunities to do just that, explains **Barbara Isaacs...**

“Writing develops easily and spontaneously in a little child in the same way as speech ... Reading on the other hand, forms part of an abstract intellectual culture. It interprets ideas represented by graphic symbols and is acquired later.”

At first, many of our Montessori students are dubious about the statement above, taken from Montessori's *The Discovery of the Child*. It does not mirror their own experiences learning to write, while much of the current research literature explores the difficulties young children experience when writing. They ask themselves: “How is it possible and what does Montessori mean by this statement?”

During her work with children with special needs Montessori observed that children with manual competence were able to reproduce letters with ease. She identified two types of skills required, an ability to link the sound of the letter to its physical shape, and to hold the writing implement. She focused on developing activities and materials that would enable young children to practise these skills, leading them to writing and reading competence. Montessori settings are well known for their multisensory approach to introducing children to phonic sounds using specially designed letters cut out of sandpaper and mounted on wood or card (blue for consonants and red for vowels). Practice in tracing the letter shapes and linking them with the sounds helps the children combine the phonic sounds of letters with their shape. It also guides them towards identifying the letter sound in words, focusing on the initial sounds before exploring those at the end and in the middle. This activity helps them in forming the letters when writing, and also with their initial reading when de-coding c-v words and encountering blends in words.

It is the physical skills essential for writing that are often overlooked and underestimated

amongst early years practitioners. In the Montessori classroom there is an area called ‘activities of everyday living’, or ‘practical life activities’. Here there is much emphasis on ‘preparation of the hand’. We call this an indirect preparation, as the main focus is to foster children's independence whilst manipulating a range of everyday tools. While practising to use tongs, scoops and tweezers, young children strengthen the muscles in their fingers and develop flexibility of the wrist. When threading and sewing, they develop eye-hand coordination and begin to understand the principles of needing to start in a particular place and follow a pattern. They practise how to hold the tip of the thread or a needle, focusing on the tripod grip. They also have an opportunity to use pegs, which further strengthen the thumb, pointer and middle finger. I know these are familiar activities in most early years settings; however, have you made the connection with preparation for writing? Have you been able to explain to parents why and how playing in the sandpit prepares a child for the much-valued ability to write?

At other times children are encouraged to trace the insets of the puzzles with flat shapes included in the sensorial area – exploring with their pointer and middle fingers the straight and curved lines of triangles, circles and rectangular figures. They come to use the frames of these insets again when they practise with them as stencils, developing their lightness of touch and creating patterns of their choice. This is a more formal preparation for writing, and is preceded by many opportunities to mark-make in the creative area both inside and outside the classroom, when exploration of writing implements and mark-making tools is an essential pre-requisite.

This preparation and refinement of fine motor skills serves young children well when it comes to both writing and reading. The recognition of the letter sounds and shapes is the first step towards reading. The focus on indirect preparation of the hand gives them the confidence when writing and links the Montessori activities directly with the handwriting early learning goals.

The next challenge comes in encouraging nursery age children to want to put down their ideas, and in developing their understanding of the purpose of writing. Here the reading and writing are combined and represent the child's ability to share his/her ideas with others. This capacity to express oneself can be seen also as the foundation of being able to create writing. If we want to encourage this skill, we need to model it – adults using a pen and paper to make notes or shopping lists, write cards and messages to friends all demonstrate to children why writing is useful and encourage them to want to have a go.

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