

Order, Organization *Beauty* in the Classroom: A Prerequisite, Not an Option

By Cathleen Haskins

Visiting Montessori classrooms is a source of inspiration and information for the work I do in supporting and advocating for Montessori education. This is my full-time work, and it involves an ongoing study of Dr. Montessori's writings, as well as visiting Montessori schools and classrooms on a regular basis to see how my understanding of those writings plays out in today's classrooms (or the reverse—how classroom observations bring Montessori's writings to life). Many times, my classroom observations have raised my level of inspiration and amazement to the tipping point. Montessori education, at its best, is a combination of art and science, an exquisite balance of subjectivity and objectivity. When done well, a Montessori environment resembles a carefully crafted piece of art, a skillfully constructed laboratory for the study of life. The work of creating

such a masterpiece is a labor of love and a commitment of extraordinary depth. It is not an easy undertaking.

Occasionally, I step into a Montessori environment in which something is clearly askew, where a fundamental element of Montessori's vision and pedagogy are missing. My observations reveal that two particular components of the prepared environment are absent more often than any other: organization and beauty, both key to successful Montessori classrooms. On this topic, Dr. Montessori was relentless: organization and beauty in the classroom are a prerequisite, not an option.

Order and Organization

"The children in our schools are free, but that does not mean there is no organization. Organization, in fact, is necessary, and if the children are to be free to *work*, it must be even more thorough than in the ordinary schools." (Montessori, 1989, p. 244).

Dr. Montessori observed that very early in life, young children demonstrate the need for order and organization in their environment. She told numerous stories of little children who became, seemingly for no reason, agitated and upset in ways that bewildered even the most attentive parents. As it turns out, in each instance the child was intensely distressed by an item removed from its usual or expected location in the environment. Whether it be a misplaced umbrella, a coat, or a throw pillow, all evoked a dramatic response in a child who could not be placated until the item was returned to its proper place. As in Montessori's day, adults today do not generally consider that children have an innate desire for order in their surroundings. Instead, children are often accused of being inherently messy, an idea Montessori refuted, claiming a natural sensitive period for order during the first years of life. She understood the importance of orderliness not only for



Frida Azari

Working with the knobbed cylinders in a well-organized classroom

the young child but also for older children and adults. "A proper environment for the soul," she wrote, "is one in which an individual can move about with eyes closed and find, simply by reaching out his hand, anything he desires. Such an environment is necessary for peace and happiness" (Montessori, 1982, p. 53).

A well-organized learning environment encourages autonomy as the child grows and creates himself. The role of the teacher is to provide support as the child moves through this process and toward normalization. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the teacher to develop and maintain an overarching order within the classroom.

The first thing the teacher must do is to prepare an environment. She must put everything in order in the environment. She must see that the material is in perfect order. She must see that everything is attractive so that the children will like the environment as soon as they enter it. (Montessori, 1998, p. 14)

Here Montessori calls upon teachers to organize the classroom in an aesthetically pleasing manner so that the child will find it an appealing, enjoyable place to be. Order and organization in all areas of the classroom are necessary for the child to self-educate at his level of capability. Self-reliance and independence lead the way toward normalization and at the same time are

characteristic of the normalized state. In a consistent, orderly environment the young child is able to make sense of his world by classifying, sorting, and making connections. An orderly environment is the guiding light that enables the child to successfully navigate the series of activities and exercises that fill his day, and encourages an attitude of respect and care for the spaces he occupies and the material belongings he possesses.

For the older child, classroom organization offers stability and consistency, as the learning materials become more complex and the academic curriculum more rigorous. Today, as we are beginning to recognize the harmful effects of a too-much-stuff lifestyle and a throwaway mentality, the carefully

prepared (and maintained) learning environment offers an alternative aesthetic of simplicity, order, and harmony. Montessori understood this, insisting upon learning environments that were simple and uncluttered, with the furniture thoughtfully arranged and the materials meticulously organized, displayed, and maintained.

Children who independently and confidently engage in work and who reap the maximum benefit of a Montessori education do so in large part because their learning environment is exceptionally orderly and organized. The work of the teacher is to create and maintain an ongoing sense of order and harmony. The orchestration of organization begins with an overarching understanding of how the curriculum flows and extends to the smallest detail: the placement of a sponge, spoon, or magnifying glass on a tray. It is not a simple undertaking, nor is there one set way to achieve orderliness, but when done well, it is an indication of the teacher's understanding of the fundamental components of a successful program as well as her ability and willingness to carry out a core element of Maria Montessori's vision for facilitating the unveiling of a child's potential.

Spatial Arrangement

Freedom, the freedom to make choices throughout the day, is essential for the child to realize her innate potential. Strong decision-making skills are honed as the child is constantly making choices about what work she will do, how long she will do that work, and where she will work. She will choose to work alone, with a partner, or in a small group, and she will begin to understand and appreciate the benefits of each option. This is truly preparation for the "real world," as the ability to be comfortable and capable in each of these situations is a life skill. The young child may prefer individual work, the older child a partner or group



Susan Gaudio



Susan Gaudio

Floor mats and trays set boundaries for work spaces

work, but practice and experience is needed in both situations. The physical layout and arrangement of the furniture is directly related to the success children will have in making and carrying out these work choices.

Valuable experience is gained when there is space for individual and partner work. Working individually helps a child to internalize what she is learning, builds self-reliance, and allows deep concentration. Working with one or more partners encourages collaboration, brainstorming, listening skills, patience, and give and take. Classroom organization works best when it supports both. Some Montessori classrooms mix independent and group workspaces throughout the room, and others contain only large group work tables on which there is no defined workspace, with children overlapping from one space to the next. But more careful attention to the design of work areas will assure that those students who are working with partners can do so freely and without fear of disturbing others, while those who are engaged in projects or with materials that are best suited for individual work, who are intentionally striving to increase and deepen their concentration, can choose a quiet, protected space. For example, one area of the room can be designated for individual work—a quiet, out-of-the-way space for work rugs and small tables to be used when children are working independently, and a separate area set up for two or more children to work together.

In one of my classrooms, the students agreed that the back of the room would be the independent work area, where they could concentrate quietly with few distractions, and the front of the room near the cubbies, door, and snack table would most effectively serve as a partner or group work space, where larger tables and multiple rugs could be placed side by side. The children were respectful of the quiet workspace; they did not walk through it to get to other parts of the classroom, and they did not interrupt classmates who were working in that area. In fact, it was often referred to as a *sacred* space, an indication that the children were internalizing the value of working alone. This was a space designed and designated specifically to promote focus and concentration during independent work. As students contemplated what they would work on and where, it was interesting to hear them comment on how they chose the quiet work area because they wanted to *really* concentrate, or that the front of the room was a wiser choice because they wanted to be able to talk freely as they worked with classmates on a project. If the child is to reap the benefits of the freedoms offered in a Montessori education, those freedoms must be set within a structure that supports the child and promotes success. The organization of space and furniture to accommodate both partner work and independent work is a significant part of that support framework.



Susan Gaudio

Careful attention reflects concentration

The peacefulness, slow movement, and sense of calm in a Montessori classroom have much to do with the manner in which the learning environment is organized and maintained. Not too long ago, I observed an elementary classroom in which, at the close of the morning work time, the children jumped over rugs and materials on the floor, bumped into one another, haphazardly tossed books onto a pile on a shelf, and left papers, markers, and books strewn across their work area. When the children left the room for lunch, the teacher turned to me and remarked with a sigh that the students had little respect for the classroom environment or materials and showed no regard for moving about the classroom with grace or courtesy. Having spent the morning in the classroom, it was obvious that the children were mimicking the lack of overall organization and orderly processes in this classroom that was cluttered and unkempt. The teacher did not yet understand the correlation between the disordered classroom and the commotion the students created as they moved about the room. Only when the classroom was orderly and organized would the students begin to bring order to their movement and behavior. Montessori teachers often laugh at what is jokingly referred to as obsessive tendencies toward meticulous organization and scrupulous attention to detail, but we also recognize that within the Montessori learning environment, order and organization

are the pillars that support the child in developing traits of mindfulness, grace, and control of movement.

Child's Workspace

Defining a workspace is an element of organization, and when it is absent, there is a kind of "bleeding," which can be distracting and detract from a child's focus and concentration. Yet many of the materials call for the child to stay exceptionally focused, and as Montessorians we pride ourselves on creating environments that nurture attention and concentration. A work rug or table surface defines a workspace and helps the child as she learns to organize the materials she is working with. If the table is shared, it is important to help children define their individual workspaces. Sometimes a small work rug on the table will suffice. Painter's tape also works and can be easily removed without residue. Children eventually learn how to define a space without physical parameters, but in the early stages they benefit from concrete guidelines.

Whether it is a rug on the floor or a tabletop space, establishing protocols for the organization of work materials is essential. At the beginning of the school year, along with the other start-up lessons, a lesson may be given to demonstrate work material organization within a workspace. Colored pencils, writing utensils, scissors, and glue sticks are kept in a pencil bin or small container on the rug to keep them from rolling around or staining the work rug; papers and books are neatly arranged to make use of space; and the child learns to keep all her materials within reach. This orderliness allows the child to function independently, limits distractions, and builds respect for her work materials and the environment.

In *Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius*, Angeline Lillard differentiates between macro and micro levels of order and organization in the

Montessori learning environment. "At the macro, daily-schedule level, there is little adult-imposed structure. . . . At the micro level, however, Montessori education is very ordered" (p. 292). This balance of freedom at the macro level (the student chooses what to do, how long to work on it, and with whom to work) and detailed structure at the micro level (materials are sequentially organized on the shelves, activities are placed in a particular order on a tray, and most lessons are presented with very specific steps) is the secret to maintaining the sense of freedom and structure in which the child thrives.

There are always times, of course, when a project demands a mess; it is part of the process of some work. An orderly and organized system allows children to clean up independently and easily, since they know what to do and have access to necessary tools to do so. The child then engages in the complete work cycle with confidence and pride. When the classroom organization is understood and familiar to the child, cleaning up and putting away is of as much interest as any other part of a project.

Making Time for Room Care

Establishing regular routines around care of the classroom environment allows the children to take responsibility for maintaining order and cleanliness and nurtures a strong sense of stewardship of the classroom. A short room care routine at the close of each work period may involve a check of the shelves, floors, and snack area for anything out of place or in obvious need of being picked up, cleaned up, or returned to its place. But weekly or biweekly room care may be up to an hour long, during which every child has a responsibility to participate in more detailed jobs, such as cleaning and checking the continent maps, organizing the class books, washing windows, folding laundry, cleaning

cubbies, organizing materials neatly on their trays, and organizing the trays on the shelves. It may include shaking out the work rugs, removing all materials from a shelf to dust it, refilling bird feeders, or scrubbing the sink. These tasks can be rotated through the group, but not too frequently, as it takes practice to feel comfortable and good at these responsibilities.

Classroom Materials

Freedom and structure go hand in hand in Montessori education. The structure that is necessary for children to work diligently, rigorously, and respectfully is manifested in the precise order of the learning environment. The child depends on always finding the material he needs in its proper place and on knowing where to return work when the task is completed. There is no need to ask the teacher where a particular item is located, and the child is not dependent upon an adult to pull out of cabinets or off high shelves the items needed to go about his work.

It is a teacher's primary role to create organization within the classroom and to maintain orderliness. The teacher makes certain that the classroom is set up based upon an underlying framework of organization, choosing where to place shelves, tables, a peace area, and so on. Before children arrive for the first day of school, the teacher establishes how and where the various curriculum materials are organized. Where best to place history and geography materials? How can all of the language materials be organized in one area? Should the zoology and botany areas be side by side? Math materials are arranged sequentially, many are color coded, and they must be displayed ready for students. This means that each material has its own place and that there is room for accessories or extensions to be placed nearby.

Within each curriculum area, materials are ordered in a sequential

manner and organized with attention to detail, such as how best to house each material: Does it sit on the shelf, in a basket, or on a tray? How do the trays fit together on the shelves, and what color trays should be used? If there are extension activities (papers) that are needed, are they placed on the tray next to the activity or on another tray, or perhaps in a folder placed in a vertical stand? Should resource books be sorted in baskets or bins? Should the books be organized within each curriculum area (animal books by zoology shelves, plant books in the botany area, books about earthquakes in the geography area) or should all books be organized in a class library?

The smallest details matter: all zoology folders should be clearly labeled in the same way, each set of botany cards put together in the same order, towels and dust cloths all folded alike, and trays and baskets evenly spaced and placed at the edge of the shelves. Are compatible materials organized in the same fashion? Do the trays and baskets sit properly on the shelves? No detail should be overlooked.

Simplicity in the Learning Environment (Is There Too Much Stuff?)

"If there are too many things, or more than one complete set for a group of thirty or forty children, this causes confusion. So we have few things, even if there are many children" (Montessori, 1989, p. 223).

The teacher is responsible for making certain there are no unnecessary objects and should exercise vigilance in her efforts to keep the room uncluttered and pleasing to the eye. Is it possible that we have too much stuff? This is a particularly pertinent question for elementary teachers who are striving to meet the needs of students with a range of understanding and skill, especially in the area of reading. In studying volcanoes, for example, there should be materials at a reading level

for emergent readers as well as materials for students who are proficient readers, and for all those in between.

In other situations, teachers are asked to integrate additional materials into the classroom. These materials take up additional room on the shelf. (If storage space is in short supply, it will be even more challenging for the teacher to keep the room looking neat and orderly.) Before you know it, trays are pushing against trays, baskets are overflowing, materials are set in precarious positions, and works are stacked one on top of the other. The too-much-stuff syndrome, filling every nook and cranny until the room is bursting at its seams, can easily overwhelm students!

Beauty in the Montessori Classroom

"The child should live in an environment of beauty."

In Lynne Cherry's book *The Great Kapok Tree* (2000), the animals of the Amazon rain forest, one by one, present their reasons for not cutting down the great kapok tree. The animals—snakes, frogs, jaguars, monkeys—each approach the man who has fallen asleep with an ax in his hand and whisper in his ear why the beloved ancient tree must be spared. The three-toed sloth plods over to the man and in her lazy, slow voice asks, "Señor, how much is beauty worth? Can you live without it? If you destroy the beauty of the rain forest, on what would you feast your eyes?" Beauty is needed in the classroom so that children may experience seeing, feeling, and touching beauty.

Not everyone sees beauty in the same way or in the same objects, but we each know beauty when we see it. It causes us to pause in awe, to reflect, or to be still for a moment in appreciation. We need beauty because it soothes our soul and it inspires us. "Beauty both promotes concentration of thought and offers refreshment to

the tired spirit," Montessori reminded us. "We may say that the best place adapted to the life of man is an artistic environment; and that, therefore, if we want the school to become a 'laboratory for the observation of human life' we must gather within it things of beauty" (1991, p. 114). In an early account of Montessori's work, Carolyn Sherwin Bailey (2009, p. 93) records her observations of children in the *Casa dei Bambini* in Via Giusti, describing the beauty and simplicity of the environment, speaking of the child's need to satisfy her "beauty hunger."

The role of beauty in the Montessori classroom is fundamental, for it is intimately tied to auto-education, evoking interest in the materials and in learning. Just as order assists the child in spontaneous activity and supports his efforts to self-educate, so too does beauty. Beauty is the voice that calls the child to engage with the materials and elevates him to a higher level of grace and courtesy as he interacts in his environment. The mindful Montessori teacher pays careful attention to her environment in order to understand what style of beauty best fits the classroom space. My original public school classroom lacked warmth; it needed fresh paint, color, and fabrics to brighten what felt like years of institutionalized neglect. But, in a private school at which I later taught, the large, expansive windows overlooking gardens and woods called for a more minimalist and natural décor. Too many bright colors would have seemed out of place. Integrating natural materials and adding elements of nature were better choices.

It isn't only the Children's House environment that should be made beautiful. The elementary classroom must also incorporate elements of art and beauty, too often missing in environments for older students. A vase of fresh flowers, a piece of art placed on a shelf, or a seasonal nature collection thoughtfully displayed add opportu-

nities for students of all ages to experience beauty in their daily environments.

There is joy and inspiration to be found in a classroom that reflects Maria Montessori's teachings about the role of order, organization, and beauty in this environment, and these elements form the very basis for environments we create. The learning environment that reflects Montessori's call for order and organization is one that best stimulates and supports auto-education. The spirit of the child of all ages is alive with inspiration and satisfaction when beauty and simplicity are integral elements of classroom design. In these matters, we are not given an option to participate; our prepared environments must reflect a commitment to uphold the framework that supports children of all ages in their efforts to create themselves.

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