

# Sensorial education



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“ The training of the senses must begin in the formative period of life if we wish to perfect them through education and make use of them in any particular human skill. ” (Maria Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child*, Pg. 147)

Discuss the difference between sensorial impression and sensorial education. Give examples to show your understanding and explain why sensorial education is considered important in the Montessori classroom?

Maria Montessori believed in a necessary relationship between children and their environment. Children must find a properly prepared environment if they are to fully develop their unique human potentials.

Sensorial material and the education provided by it serve as the base for this intellectual development. All children go through a period of time in which they centralize all their attention on one aspect of their environment and exclude everything else. It is a time of intense concentration and mental activity on developing a particular skill at that particular time, age or phase in growth. It is driven unconsciously by an inner force which we can see when a child repeatedly does one activity with such conviction that it seems as if nothing can deter him until he accomplishes that task. ...Instances of a concentration reaching insensibility to the outer world were not usual, I noticed a peculiar behaviour that was common to all, and practically the rule in all they did- the special characteristic of child work, which I later called ‘ repetition of the exercise’. ” [1. Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, Pg. 125] There is predetermined psychic pattern that molds the unique emotional and intellectual qualities of each child. These qualities develop through what Dr. Montessori referred to as “ the sensitive periods”.

There are six such periods: sensitivity to order; sensitivity to small objects; learning through the five senses; sensitivity for walking; sensitivity for language; sensitivity for social interest. This young child (0–6 years) has an Absorbent Mind, which naturally incorporates experiences in the environment directly into his whole basic character and personality for life. This mental faculty is divided into two: the unconscious mind; and the conscious mind. From birth to 3 years the child has an unconscious mind, he absorbs impressions from his environment.

From 3 to 6 years the child continues to absorb knowledge, but now he takes it in consciously, putting it into an order and giving it a name. The child uses his impressions in his environment. It is important to note that the child's learning during these early stages is not complete; neither has it reached the internalized abstraction stage that will develop, as he grows older. It is, however, the foundation upon which later knowledge that follows will be built. Wherever this solid foundation is lacking, children will experience difficulty in learning and operating in the future. The development of the senses precedes that of the higher intellectual powers, and in the child between three and six years of age, it is in the formative period. We can then help the development of the senses during this very period, graduating and adapting the stimuli just as we ought, to aid the acquisition of speech, before it is completely developed. All the education of early childhood ought to be based on this principle – to aid the natural development of the child. ” [2. Maria Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child*, Pg. 172]

Thus, it is during this period when teachers and educationists encourage children to work on sensorial activities as the material is prepared in a way

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that they refine the senses and build on the fascination that children have with the experiences of taste, sound, touch, weight, and smell. These activities result in children learning to observe and make increasingly refined sensorial discriminations. Sensorial materials aid in the natural or overall development of the child and give him a sense of self-identity and security within the learning environment.

They provide a basis for learning in an orderly manner that is needed for neurological and psychological development. These are transitory periods, but once sensibility has been acquired it will be long lasting. Therefore the sense impressions are of long duration. In a Montessori classroom frequency of an activity is encouraged as the isolation of one single quality helps refining and developing the senses. The material is based on a logical learning sequence. It goes from the concrete to the abstract. Working on sensorial activities indirectly prepares the child for an intellectual life.

It develops cognitive skills such as thinking, judging, associating, classifying, and comparing. They enhance the powers of observation, attention and concentration. These activities promote auto-education or self-learning as well as provide for aesthetic enjoyment. Sensorial materials are like the key to the nature of things. Education is used to train the young child's mind of absorbed information from the first 3 years of life. The information at this point is a sea of impressions in the unconscious mind.

As a child works further his mind becomes aware of concepts of size, color, weight, quantity, etc. When the differences are clear, the names are introduced to describe these concepts. Montessori teachers then build on

each concept. There is an order and sequence to the materials presented. Montessori's sensorial approach helps a child categorize and use his vast amount of subconscious knowledge in his or her surroundings. This is the beginning of sensorial education. It helps develop a child's intellect. Intelligence is built upon experiences and thought processes.

The materials are designed to help a child's mind develop the necessary skills for intellectual learning. However, sensorial impressions of child's environment are not the same as sensorial education. Impressions are feelings, not an intellectual building block. The mind needs information to discriminate and appreciate different aspects of the environment. Therefore, Dr. Montessori provided sensorial educational materials for this purpose. Sensorial apparatus provides a particular purpose and focus. It includes using the child's hands, senses, and encourages spontaneous activity.

The education given is not an exercise to sharpen the senses, but to allow a child to use his or her senses to understand what they really experience in the environment. When children are able to apply these sensory impressions to their environment, it is then seen as sensorial education. The first few activities show the contrast in the sensory materials, and then graded materials. This teaches concepts of comparing and contrasting. For example, the first colors introduced are the primary colors, which are the most distinct of the chart. Red, blue, and yellow are introduced, and then the different shades and the combinations are introduced.

Intellectual development is taking place here in a concentrated way on the impressions given by the senses. Sensorial Exercises are designed by Maria

Montessori to cover every quality that can be perceived by the senses such as size, shape, composition, texture, loudness or softness, matching, weight, temperature, etc. Because the exercises cover such a wide range of senses, Montessori categorized them into different groups: Visual, Tactile, Baric, Thermic, Auditory, Olfactory, Gustatory, and Stereognostic. The materials aid the mind in making the constructions and developments that are necessary.

Since the child takes in information and understands the world through his senses, sensorial development becomes the foundation for the development of the intellect. She understood that this intellectual activity had an active approach. The materials are three dimensional and real, as she believed that children wanted to see and feel the real objects. All sensorial activities include use of the senses. “ The child’s intelligence can develop to a certain level without the help of his hand. But if it develops with his hand, then the level it reaches is higher, and the child’s character is stronger. ” [3.

Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*, Pg. 158] Children use their hands, which directly increase their concentration and stimulate intellectual growth. For example, the Pink Tower is introduced at age 3 and is aimed at developing the child’s intellect where by he will be able to differentiate in size and weight – how to hold the small cubes with his fingers, how to grasp the largest cube, controlling arms and fingers so that tower doesn’t fall; development of muscular skills; increase concentration and control movements. Maria Montessori believed that a child, without his or her hands, cannot see properly.

It is the combination or rather coordination of the hand and mind is the cornerstone of sensorial education. More activities, such as the broad stairs and the long rods are introduced after the pink tower. The more difficult exercises such as the sound cylinders and the geometric shapes follow as all the activities are designed in a way that they prepare the child for the next activity. All of these activities are with 3 dimensional objects that help with eye-hand coordination and provide a concept of size and shapes for future learning.

They promote activity, which in turn helps in physical development. “ Movement, or physical activity, is thus an essential factor in intellectual growth, which depends upon the impressions received from outside. Through movement we come in contact with external reality, and it is through these contacts that we eventually acquire even abstract ideas. ” [4. Maria Montessori, Internet. ] There are three fold aims for development of the senses. They aid the natural development of the individual. Working with sensorial materials helps identify/ detect, prevent, and correct psychological defects.

They prepare the child for community environment as they help him become aware of his environment Also, through physical and social growth, the child’s psychic (mental and emotional) life is enhanced. The sensorial materials were designed systematically such that working in successive steps the child is able to sort out and familiarize himself with the large number of impressions he possesses, to assimilate additional ones through experience, and to stimulate and refine the child’s powers of observation preliminary to acquiring judgment and understanding.

The basic aims of sensorial education in a Montessori classroom are to aid the development and refinement of the senses by providing organized opportunities for contact with the environment. Secondly, to offer the child experiences that will allow him full development of the sensitive periods; the preparation for intellectual development. Further, sensorial discrimination leads from the concrete to the abstract; it manipulates concentration and thinking skills that develop the mathematical mind; it provides opportunities for language development and strengthening fine motor skill for future writing.

The sensorial materials also expand the child's preparation by building on the order established through the daily living exercises. The child's muscular control is being refined in preparation for writing movements and holding a pencil. Three period name lessons help the child's language development. Therefore, sensorial materials are not only for the purposes of sense areas, but also for child's overall intellectual development. We have seen how sensorial impressions are not the same as sensorial education. Impressions alone are not enough. The mind needs some education to discriminate and appreciate.

Otherwise, it is the case of ' eyes that see not, and ears that hear not'.

Education of the senses can only come about when we, as teachers, provide materials where the hand stays busy. In order to learn, there must be concentration. And for the child to concentrate, he needs to fix his attention on a task he is performing with his hands. Character, intellect and dexterity are all perfected by the same activity and can be defected if the child does not have that opportunity at the right age. While educating the senses, the



focus should be on making the child ‘ know’ what he sees rather than making him see it better.

He should first appreciate what he sees then learn to compare, contrast and discriminate. This will lead the child into a conscious knowledge of the environment. As the conscious mind continues to absorb many impressions of the environment the child works to obtain conscious knowledge by using his intelligence to compare and discriminate between the impressions received by the senses.