

Geography in the Montessori Environment

By Tim Seldin

There are basically two objectives in presenting geography to the three- to seven- year- old child. The first is to help her develop a clearer sense of spatial orientation through enriched and intensive interaction and experience. The second is to encourage her to become aware of and accept other cultures through related experiences in cultural studies.

The infant is born with no sense of spatial orientation. Because she lacks experience in interacting with the external environment, muscle control, and a developed sensory system, she is left in a state of non-awareness-- even of the space of her own body, crib, bedroom, house, yard, block, or other familiar places.

The child usually enters school without clear concepts or the vocabulary of spatial relations (up, down, near, far, and so forth). At the same time, the young child has a strong need for order in the environment around her. The order established in the prepared environment can help her develop these concepts. She must know where to find things if she is to develop a clear sense of the physical space of her world. We work from the beginning to provide an atmosphere of physical order within the classroom. Every material has a specific name and a specific place in the room. Materials are grouped together by similar natures and sequenced logically. We frequently ask the child to bring us a pencil from the box on the windowsill, to put an activity back where it belongs, and to follow increasingly complex directions involving spatial vocabulary.

We usually divide the study of geography along the following conceptual lines for all age children: physical geography, cultural geography, political geography (nations, cities, borders), economic geography (natural resources, production, and transportation to market), and cartography (map skills). This is a broad picture of our approach and goes beyond what is possible for most three- to seven- year- olds. At this age level, we introduce the child to each of these areas, some at greater depth than others, and build on this knowledge in the later years.

Geography is important both as a necessary conceptual framework and spatial orientation and as a bridge to the development of the child's understanding and appreciation of the story of man and nature. As in other areas of the Montessori curriculum, we first give the child the big picture then move gradually to the details: names of countries, rivers, and mountains, and a grasp of the cultures of other lands. The framework is always man's relationship to the earth: how he meets his basic needs (shelter, food, clothing, transportation, defense, ornamentation, self- expression) under varying geographic conditions.

Geography is introduced to the young child as a source of initial impressions, intended to stimulate interests that will blossom in the later elementary years. No child is too young for a lesson that interests her, for we never know what she may take away. There is always a level at which even the youngest child in the class can work with the materials in preparation for deeper investigation. At first, most of the geography materials are presented at a level of sensorial

manipulation. One example would be the puzzle maps, which the youngest child uses initially as a sensori-motor puzzle task and only later comes to see as a simple set of maps.

A teacher supervising a child's work in the area of geography would probably include the following general sequence:

- Present the material at a sensory level.
- Present the child with the precise vocabulary of the material.
- Talk about the subject with the child.
- Present written labels for the vocabulary of the material.
- Provide reading materials (often booklets made by the teacher) to reinforce impressions about a lesson.
- Allow and encourage the child to make her own books about the subject and undertake other independent projects (maps, drawings, and so forth).

As always in Montessori, we work from what the child already knows to what she does not, from the simple to the complex, from the whole to its parts, and from the concrete to the abstract.

Working from the known to the unknown

Lessons must be sequences, starting with the review of the last thing the child has actually learned and working from there to the next step along the sequence.

Working from the simple to the complex

The sequence in which we offer lessons and materials must always consider the progression of the child's understanding of the activity or concept, starting from its simplest form and gradually taking in more difficult or complex information or skills.

Working from the whole to the parts

In sequencing lessons, particularly in the areas of science, history and geography, we do not stay with the smallest unit and work outward, following the traditional sequence from neighborhood to town, state, country, other countries, continents, and the earth. Instead we offer the child a simplified version of the reverse sequence: earth, continents, countries, America, state, city, and neighborhood. Once the child has seen the big picture, it is easier in the years ahead to begin filling in the details.

Since so many materials in the geography area must be teacher made, it is important to remember the value of simplicity, quality, and the isolation of one characteristic in each material and presentation.

A Sequence for Geography: Land, Air, and Water

Maps

The land and water globe
The continent globe
The puzzle maps
Work with the later puzzle maps
Make a map
The model town or farm
Introduction to mapping
Introduction to the directions of the compass
The town game
The flat pin maps
The regions of the United States

Physical Geography

The land and water forms
Introduction to the land features
Climates and environment

Activities to Enrich Cultural Geography

Picture folders • Booklets • Slides • Artifact boxes • Recordings of the traditional music
Cooking • Doll collections • Videos
Foreign languages
Dance
Festivals and celebrations
The city we live in
The state we live in

Flags

Introduction to the flag
Matching flags and pictures
Matching flags and their countries from the puzzle maps
Matching flags and pictures of their countries from the puzzle maps
Matching flags and the labels of the countries
Make a flag
The parts of the flag
Life- sized flag

The Solar System

The earth and the sun: first impressions
The dance of the cosmos

History in the Montessori Environment

Perhaps we teach the child to thank God and pray to him, but not to humanity, God's prime agent in creation. We give no thought to men and women who daily give their lives that we may live more richly. The child will have greater pleasure in all subjects and find them easier if he is led to realize how those subjects first came to be studied and who studied them. We write and read, and the child can be taught who invented writing and the instruments wherewith we write, how printing came and books became so numerous. Every achievement has come by a sacrifice of someone now dead. Every map speaks eloquently of the work of explorers and pioneers who underwent hardships, trials, and labor to find new places, rivers, and lakes, and to make the world greater and richer for our dwelling. Let us in education call the attention of the children to the hosts of men and women who are hidden from fame.

[Maria Montessori, 1948]

Everyone who lives with young children knows how slowly they develop a sense of time. At first, time's passage is meaningless to them. By age two- and- a- half to three, most begin to perceive time as today, yesterday, and tomorrow. At this stage everything that took place in the past happened "yesterday," while everything to come will take place "tomorrow." Gradually children become conscious of the cycle of days, weeks, months, and years, eventually developing an adult sense of time. This is the foundation of a historical perspective, for without a clear sense of time's passage, one cannot truly believe that what occurred in the past was as real as the present day.

There are adults who lack a good sense of time and have no sense of history. These people not only tend to lose track of time's passage but even have an uncertain grasp of their own personal past. Naturally, they find it almost impossible to appreciate and understand history in the broader sense. A sense of time is a concept that seems, like so many others, to develop more fully when the young child is given enriched early exposure and experience.

The purpose of introducing history to the young child is to provide that enriched early exposure and experience that should cultivate later understanding and interest. Where many schools avoid teaching history until the middle childhood or later, Montessori schools have found that children enjoy getting the "cosmic" picture very early. Dr. Montessori saw that children, especially from ages six to nine, need to feel they are a part of the universe and members of the human family.

Dr. Montessori described the mind of the six- year- old as a "fertile field blazing under a fiery sun of imagination, onto which we can sow the seeds of culture." The seeds in this case represent awareness of the history of life on the earth, how things came to be, how the "spaceship earth" functions to keep us alive, and how mankind meets its fundamental needs. From what we know of children under the age of eight, it is clear that they cannot conceive of historical time in an adult manner. This initial exposure is not intended to last a lifetime. Rather it is intended to provide initial impressions upon which we can later teach at greater depth and more abstract levels. For now, it is enough that seeds of interest have been planted in the mind of the child, where they can take root and begin to grow.

History in the Montessori school has two parts: activities to help the child develop a clear sense of time, and activities to present the story of the universe and man's role in it. To present this particularly abstract subject, Dr. Montessori advocated the use of carefully sequenced concrete experiences and materials, from the all-important time line to original and reproduced artifacts from the past.

The sequence in which is presented is quite different as well. Following essentially the principle of working from the whole to the parts, we begin with the history of the planet earth. Naturally we find that the role of mankind is a tiny fraction of this whole. In turn, we view human history not so much through the window of important person and events but from a cultural perspective: we consider the needs of man and how he has met them in different civilizations. The curriculum is thought of as "cosmic" or universal. So much is introduced in ways designed to intrigue the child that it doesn't matter that every seed does not germinate; enough of them will ensure a lifetime of study and interest. We thus begin by giving the child the big picture in the early years, preparing him to enter into the more advanced levels of independent study and research that follow.

By its nature, the history area of the Montessori curriculum requires more direct teacher presentation than any other. Our role is to prepare the materials and lessons, showing the children what to do with the materials that we place on the shelves and, at other times, telling stories of mankind's past. For the young child, history should always be presented as a story, beautiful in its simplicity and the drama of its plot. At the same time, all the child's experiences in charting the course of time and projecting himself backward and forward in personal time and simple historical time begin to develop his awareness.

A Sequence for History

Introduction to the Passage of Time
The Language of Time
The Linear Calendar
The Days of the Week
The Months of the Year
The Standard Calendar
The Seasons
The First Time Line
Introduction to the Clock
Telling Time to the Half Hour
Telling Time within Five Minutes
The Time Line of a Day
The Time Line of a Year
Personal Time Lines
My Family Tree
Time Line of My Life
Time Line of Peoples Ages Birth - 100
Time Line of a Day
Time Line of a Year
How Long Have People Been on the Earth
Time Line of The Earth's History
Story of the First Human Beings