

Montessori school

Special materials, directresses enhance preschool learning

By LAURIE BAKER
DTH Contributor

The children sit so absorbed in their playthings that they scarcely notice the teacher, who moves quietly around the room.

A little girl with blonde curls scrubs a lilliputian breakfast table, while a 3-year-old boy sits blindfolded as he feels the textures of cloth and sandpaper. Across the room, children are making up words with movable letters.

The scene is typical of the atypical classrooms at the Chapel Hill Montessori School for children aged 2 and-a-half through 6. Nestled in woods off Weaver Dairy Road, the one-story wood building looks more like a sprawling ranchhouse than a school.

The preschool is based on theories from the early 1900's of Maria Montessori, an Italian physician and mathematical prodigy.

EVERY CHILD is a born explorer, she said. She believed that a child could perform better if he relied on his own intellect rather than other people.

The teacher and parent should interfere as little as possible, she said. She said that they should observe, guide and aid the child without dominating the scene. They should stimulate the child's interest, she said, so the child can make discoveries on his own.

She believed the teacher must present the child with enough information to spark his interest. Thus she designed special materials that are used in all Montessori classrooms.

The materials, in many colors, shapes and forms, teach children to match, grade and differentiate by means of the children's senses. Wooden puzzles involve putting pegs into appropriate holes. Color tablets form an



Staff photos by Allen Jernigan

"The child is in charge, not the grownups."

orderly pattern only if arranged from darkest to lightest. Building blocks, sets of bells, beaded rods, geometric figures and movable numbers are only a few of the Montessori materials.

The Chapel Hill school applies Maria Montessori's theories by emphasizing the individual. Children are free to move around the classroom, talk with other children and choose work according to their interests.

THE TEACHER'S role is to stimulate the child and then leave him free to develop. The teachers are called directresses because they do not teach but direct the child.

The Chapel Hill school contains three classrooms, each designed for 25 children. The children are not separated by age: 3-year-olds are in the same class with 6-year-olds. "The older children often feel responsible for the younger ones," says the school's owner and directress Mary Henry. "They all help each other out."

Three classes are held from 8:30 to 11:30 a.m. Monday through Friday. A special

class from 12:30 to 2 p.m. is geared for children aged 4 and a half through 6. This class is an extension of the regular classes and is devoted to group projects.

Each class is guided by one directress and her assistant. The directresses have attended, in addition to college, national Montessori training schools for one year.

Seventy-five children attend the preschool, and 18 more children are on a waiting list. "But we don't plan to expand," says school administrator Francis Henry.

PARENTS PAY \$590 per child for the academic year, but the cost of Montessori equipment is high. Materials for each classroom cost approximately \$6,000. They are handmade and imported from Holland.

The school began in 1971, when a group of parents formed a corporation and rented two rooms in Aldersgate Methodist Church. Enrollment for that year was 40 children.

Francis and Mary Henry took over the business the next year.

They converted a warehouse off Weaver Dairy Road into a school building. When three classrooms were completed, enrollment almost doubled.

A typical classroom at the Chapel Hill school is divided into four sections: the sensorial center with Montessori materials, a practical-life area with miniature equipment, a language area with spelling and reading aids and a math section with beaded rods and scales.

IN ONE corner of the room, miniature brooms, tables, pitchers and water basins allow the children to explore practical life. "Everything is scaled to the child's size to make him feel at home," directress Jane Lazaron says. "The child is in charge, not the grown-ups."

Another section stresses language skills. Picture cards can be matched up with word cards. Pencils, paper and booklets aid in writing.

The math section is equipped with balance scales and beaded rods that help children see quantities. Velour numbers are pasted on wood blocks so that the children can feel the shapes of numbers. "The children learn



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quantity first, then the number," Lazaron says.

"In most preschools, children memorize what's written on a blackboard: one plus one equals two. Here the children see what math is all about. Math is based on the concrete."

THE CHILDREN are free to do what they want," Lazaron says. "This helps give them security. They are highly respected and very independent."

The students, however, must follow certain rules. They cannot scream or run. When they are finished with an object, they must replace it on the shelf where it belongs.

"When a child misbehaves," Lazaron says, "we talk to him until he verbalizes what's wrong. Usually there's an underlying reason why he has misbehaved."

Directress Carol Keintz agrees: "If one child hurts another, we give our attention to the child who is hurt. Eventually the other child will come over and apologize because he's not getting any attention."

"Self-correcting Montessori materials provide good learning experiences," says UNC Prof. Barbara Day, who teaches early childhood education. "The child uses his senses to learn, and this is necessary."

However, Day admits there are limitations to the Montessori method. "Most of the materials can be used in only one way. Take the pink tower, for example. You must stack pieces in graduated size until they form a pink tower. The toy won't work in any other way. It can stifle a child's creativity. Maybe he wants to construct a boat or train."

LAZARON disagrees. "It's not true that they can be used only in one way. We show a child how the toy is supposed to work, but the child is not forced to use it in that way. He can combine the pink tower with another toy and make a bridge or whatever he wants."

Lazaron says that the children who complete the Montessori pre-school make steady progress in the first grade. "Since the child has already learned basic concepts in math and language from the Montessori school," she says, "he can concentrate on his social relationships in the first grade."

Emily Hodgson, who teaches first grade at Ephesus Road Elementary School, says that all children in first grade concentrate on social skills. "I don't think this effort toward social acceptance is unique to Montessori children," she says.

"Yet they do have an easier time with math. Since Montessori children have spent years working with concrete math—beads and rods—they can more easily grasp ideas and conceptualize. They have an easier time going from the manipulative to the abstract."

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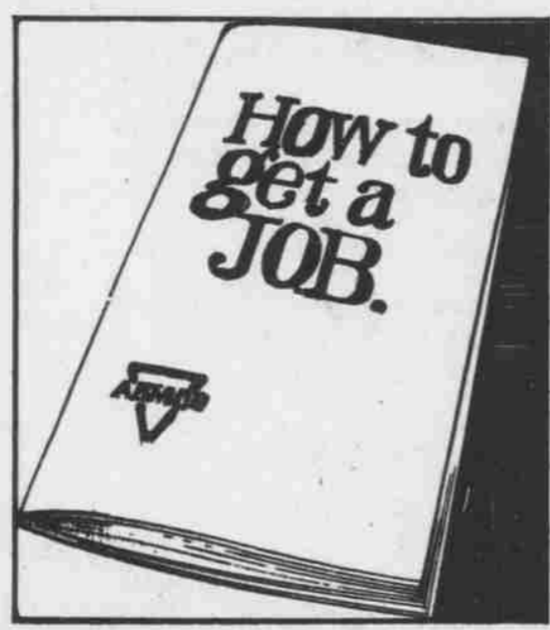
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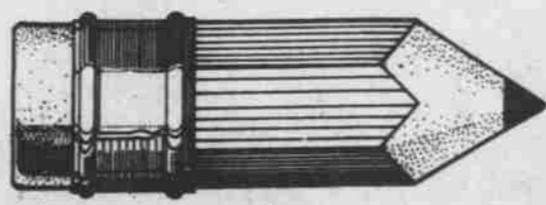


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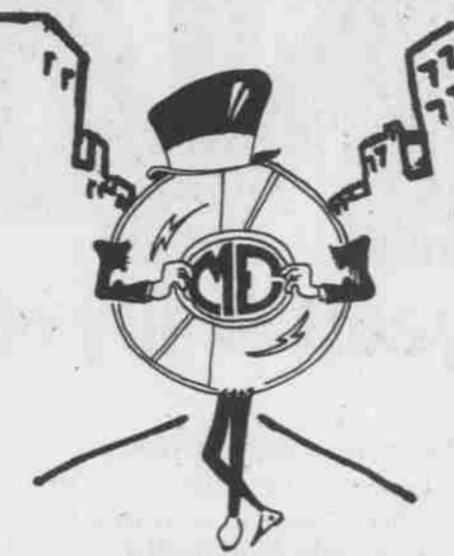
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