

A Day in an Elementary Classroom

It is first thing in the morning, and the children have just arrived. As their parents drop them off, they walk to the hallway outside our classroom, where they prepare themselves for the day by taking off and hanging up their outer wraps, changing from outdoor shoes to comfortable indoor slippers, and putting away their lunches. As they enter the classroom, they find the teacher (called a “guide” in Montessori elementary classrooms) to shake hands and greet her.

The children may begin the morning by greeting their friends. Elementary aged children are naturally gregarious, and more than anything, they want to be with and work with their friends. Nonetheless, as soon as they have said “good morning” each child gets her journal from her own storage cupboard and records the day of the week and the date at the top of a new page. Throughout the day, she will record the presentations she receives from the guide and the activities she chooses to work on. These journals become an important source of information and accountability when the child and the guide meet to review the child’s work and make plans for the near future.

On this particular day, the guide is all but invisible first thing in the morning, allowing the children to settle into their work without interference. Soon, she will begin inviting small groups of children to presentations on a wide variety of topics.

This morning, three children aged 6 and 7 - some of the youngest children in the class -- have taken out two large timelines and spread them across the floor, one on each side of the room. One timeline is The Timeline of Life, which shows the evolution of animals for the last half billion years. The other timeline is identical to the first, except that it is missing all the pictures and section headers. Instead, these are kept on the shelf separately, as cutout pieces which can be placed on the timeline. The children’s job is to reconstruct the timeline. In the process, they challenge their

memories, learn to work together, and learn about evolution.

Meanwhile, a 7 and a 10 year old child are writing a story together and more children are reading about Ancient Egypt. Their plan is to make a timeline of the history of Egypt, including new inventions, artistic trends, and famous Pharaohs. They also plan to build a model of an Egyptian pyramid. When the timeline is done, they will present it to the class in an oral report, and perhaps invite parents in to hear their report also.

A small group of the oldest children in the class - aged 10-12 - are reviewing the plans they made earlier in the week for a trip to the art museum. They are researching the art of Vincent Van Gogh, and have made arrangements to meet with a museum curator to further their research and to spend time in the museum making sketches of the Van Gogh pieces on display. They will take the bus to the museum and plan to be there for most of the day. Before they go, they need to gather their supplies: bus tickets, a map, the plan they've already made, emergency supplies, permission slips, and the contact information for the museum curator. A parent will go along as a chaperone, but the children are the ones in charge of this "Going Out" expedition, and the trip's success or failure rests on their shoulders.

The morning continues with groups of children choosing work from all the areas of the classroom: art, geography, science, language, mathematics, geometry, and music. The materials and lessons in the Montessori elementary classroom are open-ended and invite creative follow-up work of all kinds. After a story about American Goldfinches, some children may decide to reread the card and picture material introduced in the lesson, others may research different songbirds, draw pictures of goldfinches, or go outside to look for birds. Still others may decide to plan a Going Out to the local Audubon Society to speak to an expert about how to set up a bird feeder in the garden.

At noon, a child will ring a bell to let all the children know that

it is time to tidy their work and prepare for lunch. The children will set their places with placemats and eat together before cleaning their place at the table and going outside. While outside time is unstructured “recess”, it is not uncommon for the children to spend this time looking at flowers or berries, or playing “Early Humans” by experimenting with what it would be like to use rocks as tools. Often, outside time flows naturally into the afternoon work cycle.

The afternoon proceeds much the same way as the morning, with children choosing their work and the guide continuing to give presentations to small groups of children. This afternoon, some children are working on planting the vegetable garden they have been designing for several weeks, and so they are outside. Other children are in the hallway practicing their performance of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

About once a week, the guide meets individually with each child to look at the work the child has been doing and to look at what he has written in his work journal, his personal record of how he has spent his time at school. During this meeting, they set goals, discuss any lessons the child would like to have or work that the child might need help to complete, and talk about any social challenges the child might be having. These regular meetings are an important part of the support and accountability that allow the children to be responsible for choosing how to use their time in the elementary classroom.

At the end of the school day, it is not uncommon to hear children complain that it is too soon to go home because they have more work to do. No homework is assigned, but the excitement of the school day naturally carries over into further research, dinner table conversation, and quiet reflection at home.