

Sensorial Explorations of Geography

The Study of Geography within the Context of the Montessori Environment

Geography is the science of the earth and of its life. It includes a study of the land, sea and air. It examines the distribution of plant and animal life, including human kind. The roots of the word are ‘geo’ – meaning earth, and ‘graphia’ – meaning to graph and to describe; so Geography is a study of describing our earth.

In the Montessori setting, we look at ways to make logical associations to cultural and scientific areas of instruction within the established areas of the classroom (Sensorial, Practical Life, and Language). In this way we are able to support the child’s capacity to build mental categorizations, to develop their movement, to augment language development and incorporate these areas of instruction. The work that the child does in the 3 – 6 environment lays the foundation and prepares the child for a more formalized study of geography once they arrive in the elementary.

There are two approaches to the study of geography:

- Physio-geography – studies the physical make-up of the planet
- Socio-geography – studies the people that populate the planet

We will provide opportunities to the children to approach geography from both perspectives.

Purpose of the Geography Extensions

The young child arrives in the Montessori environment with an image of that portion of the world which is around him, that which he has been exposed to. His absorbent mind is non-discriminatory and takes everything in its totality; so he has a vast storehouse of impressions, which have been stored away like a treasure heap. Now the child needs help to make a logical framework to organize his impressions. The child’s tendency towards work and manipulation will assist him in this endeavor.

Our purposes in offering the geography extensions to the young child is not to make walking encyclopedias of the children, although many often reach an astonishing level of

intellectual understanding of the world's geography. This is a by-product, not our main purpose. Our purposes for offering the geography extensions are

1. To provide the child with activities to help him bring order to his impressions and information.
2. To introduce the child to his place within the scope of the entire earth.
3. To help the child become aware of the oneness of humankind.
4. To help the child to appreciate the sameness of all humankind on the one hand, and on the other hand to see the amazing scope of variations among people as a result of physical geography (climate, land and water forms, etc.) and the creative efforts and inventions of humankind.

Montessori Approach: From a Larger to a Smaller Geographical Unit

In traditional schooling, they often start with the smaller geographical unit and work outwards. A discussion about the child's neighborhood may be the first introduction. It then expands to the larger community or city, then perhaps out to the state in which the child lives, the country and eventually the global. In other words, it begins with an examination of those who live like you. As the discussion moves outward, it is tradition to look at the differences; so the child has an inherent foundation of prejudice towards others – "they are different from us".

Dr. Montessori turned this concept on its head. We start with a vision of the world as a whole. The child's first geographic experience in the Montessori environment is with the Sandpaper Globe and the Painted Globe. This instills within the child a global vision from a very young age. Only then do we move on to the understanding of the different continents through the World Puzzle Map. Then the child is introduced to the progressively smaller geographic units of countries and eventually states.

Work with the Puzzle Maps gives the child an impression of the arbitrary political boundaries of countries and states, but they do not give the children an idea that people actually live there, so we have the companion piece of the Folders of Pictures. Our task in compiling the photos for these folders is to give the child images that reflect our commonalities. These pictures highlight the fundamental needs of human beings (food,

clothing, housing, etc.) and how people in different parts of the world meet those particular needs. At the core, this promotes within the child a sense that he is no different from children in other parts of the world from continent to continent.

Imagine the impact that this has on the child. Rather than see others as strange or weird for the way they do things, or even worse, as an enemy because of the way they do things – now the child has the opportunity to see the similarities. He has the opportunity to see that he is one with others in the world. This approach may become an outlook, may become incarnated into his very soul. This could have the potential to change the world in only a couple of generations. Promotion of a oneness of humankind is Dr. Montessori's approach to peace education.

Dr. Montessori's Experience Leads to her Approach

We remember that Dr. Montessori's experience in Europe was one of strong animosity between countries. This approach was engrained in the children from a very young age. She understood that this was the attitude that created wars and conflict, and that led man to destroy each other.

In some of her later writings Dr. Montessori used the analogy of a woven tapestry. She compared the various people to individual threads in the weaving. If every thread were the same, what a boring tapestry it would produce. So much more interesting for every thread to be different!