Building Intercultural Competency in the Language Immersion Montessori Classroom

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A 4½-year-old walks over to the geography area in her immersion Montessori classroom and helps herself to a green piece of paper that has the outline of Africa on it. She takes the perforating tool, referred to as a 'pin punch' in the other hand, and glances around the room for an open table. Then, she goes, sits and proceeds to pin-punch out the continent of Africa. Every day for the past week, her three-six Primary Montessori immersion classroom has been singing *Los Continentes del Mundo* in their daily repertoire of music during morning gathering time. This immersion Montessori classroom, which has about 25 mixed age students ranging from three to six years old, functions like a community of little people where respect, openness, curiosity and discovery reign.

In her article entitled, "Theoretical Reflections: Intercultural Framework / Model" Darla Deardorff provides the Pyramid Model of Cultural Competency (see Figure 1.1). At the bottom of the pyramid she places three ‘Requisite Attitudes,’ which support the remaining three blocks above. She clarifies these foundational attitudes: Respect (the valuing of other cultures, cultural diversity); Openness (to intercultural learning and to people of other cultures, withholding judgment); Curiosity and Discovery (tolerating ambiguity and uncertainty). While this present article will largely refer to the attitudes found at the base of Deardorff’s pyramid model, it is both interesting and important to note what the other successive blocks are within the Pyramid of Intercultural Competency: moving up the pyramid, we find the next block of Knowledge & Comprehension/Skills, on top of which sits Desired Internal Outcome (informed frame of reference/ filter shift). Finally, at the top of the pyramid, sits the culmination of intercultural competence model, Desired External Outcome: behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately (based on one’s intercultural knowledge & skills, attitudes to achieve one’s goals to some degree).

The Requisite Attitudes of Respect, Openness, Curiosity and Discovery, identified by Darla Deardorff for Cultural Competence are both readily cultivated by the students in a Montessori primary classroom and are a part of the formal teacher training in the Montessori method of education. In all Montessori classrooms, the educational method and philosophy serve as the vehicle for the development of these requisite attitudes of intercultural competency. However, in the language immersion Montessori setting, the student gains the added skill of biliteracy and bilingualism to further increase the skillset of this developing culturally sensitive youngster. The development of this second language skill serves to reciprocally reinforce the intercultural competency already underway in the Montessori environment. The following article will give some of the numerous ways Montessori classrooms and specifically, immersion Montessori environments support Deardorff’s model. Respect, Openness, Curiosity and Discovery become embedded over the three year Montessori cycle into the everyday behaviors and thinking patterns of the young child.

*Respect:* In a Montessori classroom the emphasis on respect manifests itself in three main areas: the teaching paradigm, the classroom functioning and daily routines and finally, in the specific lessons. The teaching paradigm in a Montessori classroom, which implies both the instructional dynamic and the individual teacher, is rooted in the Montessori philosophy at whose center we find Respect. The Montessori teacher is taught first and foremost to observe the children and refrain from judgment. Simply watch, take notes and “follow the child.” The notion of “following” the child implies respecting his needs, his place on his own developmental continuum and his infinite potential, which includes becoming a future contributing world citizen. The second most important element an adult learns in his/her Montessori teacher education program is the importance of modeling absolutely everything s/he does. Being conscious of what we do, how we do it, when we do it, engenders con-
tinual self-awareness on the part of the teacher. Modeling has a
crucial role in the Montessori classroom because young children are
exceptionally impressionable and naturally imitate most everything
adults say and do. The Montessori teacher must be very self-aware
about how s/he is talking, walking and speaking to the child. S/he is
also cognizant of modeling the skills of observation, without judgment,
of “following” the child. This conscious inner shift which cer-
tainly requires practice and self-discipline mirrors the expectations
we have of the students: that they too cultivate respect of every indi-
vidual.
Montessori instruction is predicated on respect; respect of the
student’s individual learning needs, of personal space and even the
whole person. Painting a daily scene in a Montessori classroom will
help communicate this radical
and deep underlying layer of re-
spect that permeates every as-
ppect of the learning environment.
The Montessori teacher, most of-
ten sitting on the floor next to
the child, gives a math lesson to
a four year-old and to an almost
five year-old while another five
year-old, holding a card in her
hand that says “las partes de la
flor,” stands with her other hand
on the teacher’s shoulder, wait-
ing for the teacher to answer her
question. Another 4 ½ year-old
does a food preparation activ-
ity and then offers a serving to
two other friends seated at ta-
bles nearby. An adult visiting the
school that day sits in a chair ob-
serving these 25 students who are
each doing their own activities at
various places around the room
while a soft mix of gentle piano
music and the sounds of the forest
plays in the background. A four
year-old approaches the seated
visitor with a glass of water and
asks “Quieres agua?” Montessori
classrooms are intentional about
welcoming everyone.
The assistant teacher, on
the other side of the classroom,
hunches down to talk to a three
year-old who has asked for more paper for the easel while, this same
assistant is simultaneously acknowledging the presence of a little
hand on her shoulder as well. The three year-old waiting next to
her would like help zipping up her sweatshirt but she, too, is practic-
ing ‘the interrupting lesson.’ There is a Montessori lesson on inter-
rupting, which the teacher presents to the students, usually in a role
play scenario at a gathering time at the beginning of the year. We
have this lesson for both pragmatic and philosophical reasons. A
teacher can only answer one person’s question at time, thus it meets
the practical need. Philosophically, the act of making the time to
talk to one child at a time, on a one-on-one basis underlines an
individual’s worthiness and value. Furthermore, it both speaks to the
child’s perception of her self-value – that she can get the teacher’s
100% attention, no matter what the request and it acknowledges
that no matter what the person’s age or status, every person mat-
ters as much as the next in the Montessori classroom. The inter-
rupting lesson is just one of many lessons that belong to the Grace
and Courtesy part of the Montessori three-six curriculum. These are
the required ground rules of the classroom so that this intricate en-
vironment of 25 students doing about 20 different activities with
only two-three adults can function smoothly, like cogs of giant gears
slowly, neatly meshing into each other. Grace and Courtesy, which
is the basis of all Montessori classroom functioning, finds its roots in
respect of all individuals, the educational materials and the physi-
cal space.
While the adults are giving individual lessons, and the other stu-
dents are respecting the
teachers’ time and their
peers’ current needs by
waiting with a hand on
the shoulder, there are two
other boys who are work-
ing together in the sensorial
area of the classroom. They
carefully carry blocks of var-
ious weights and lengths
from the shelf to their work
space. Just as precise as is
the conscious intention
and purposeful care with
which the children trans-
port these blocks, so is the
designated area where they
will construct with these
blocks. They have previ-
ously laid out, at a place
they choose, a 3’x 2’ light
colored rug which defines
the work space for them.
There, in that space, they
begin to construct. It is their
work space for their activity.
This rug on the floor repre-
sents another element in the
Montessori classroom that
contributes to the cultiva-
tion of respect, and also, fills
the practical need of send-
ing the silent but clear mes-
gage to others: “This is my
project, please do not touch it,” or, in other words, “please respect
my space.”
In the beginning of the school year, the students are instructed
on the use of rugs. They learn all the functionality of its use: such
as, where the rug bin is located, how to roll it up and put it away,
how to carry it, what activities go on a rug etc. As in the interrup-
ting lesson mentioned above, using a rug falls under the Grace and
Courtesy area of the curriculum since these lessons are needed for
smooth, respectful interactions within a busy classroom. The idea
of literally defining one’s work space with a rug is another example of
how the Montessori instructional method is grounded in Respect,
which we know to be at the center of the educational philosophy.
In fact, all the other students who are lying, sitting, kneeling or
crouching next to their own rugs are doing their respective activities, some alone, some with one or two friends. This classroom functions peacefully and smoothly because the instructional dynamic depends on independence and respect. Students are encouraged to choose activities and practice them on their own and at their own pace, thereby experiencing a great sense of freedom. Yet, these same students follow the deep structure and routines of the classroom (like never touching another’s rug) which require the constant practice of respect. The atmosphere in Montessori classrooms of ease, peacefulness, flexibility and freedom all exist due to tightly woven, underlying structure grounded in respect.

A hum of busy activity typifies a Montessori classroom, but all the students and teachers use quiet, inside voices giving messages to one person at a time, responding to an individual need, be it a spontaneous hug, a request for a new lesson, or a need for more paint. Each work space is defined by the rug which may have one or two friends working there and, which is respected as “theirs” by all members of the classroom. No one walks on another’s activity rug, no one removes any items from the rug nor, ideally, does one interrupt a student working with their Montessori material on their rug. When the environment’s expectation is that students maintain the same level of respect for all the people in this mixed-aged community, the children rise to the occasion. This happens day after day in hundreds of public and independent Montessori settings in the United States and all over the world. While Montessori classrooms may have a slightly different array of materials, all Montessori classrooms “feel” the same.

Openness: The second ‘Requisite Attitude’ found at the base of the Deardorff’s Pyramid of Cultural Competency, Openness comes naturally to the children. All classrooms with young students can take advantage of the naturally non-judgmental and bias-free attitude of young children. In a language immersion Montessori classroom, these young students receive all their lessons in the target language and, because they are in a language sensitive age, they absorb it like the native tongue. While this language acquisition process is mostly unconscious and effortless, the language immersion aspect creates an environment for these young children in which they are continuously interacting with adults of different nationalities. They are thus, practicing every day being open to people different from them, who may speak English with an accent and, whose native culture may shine through in numerous, spontaneous ways from simple gestures to cultural celebrations.

The student who pin-punched her green continent of Africa has finished her activity and put it in her work folder. The Montessori teacher, who observes that her student has now completed her work approaches her student and puts her hand on the student’s shoulder. The teacher, knowing that she has now completed pin-punching all the continents, invites her student to get a large piece of blue paper to represent the Earth’s water. “¿Te gustaría cortar los océanos ahora para que puedas pegarlos junto a los continentes? ¿Te gustaría cortar el océano del hemisferio norte y el hemisferio sur?”

In a Montessori three-six classroom, there is a geography area of the classroom with one or two shelves of age appropriate activities to learn about the world. In Montessori primary classrooms all over the world, the map stand, which is in this geography area, holds the famous puzzle maps: the Continent map, and puzzle maps of North America, South America, Europe, Africa and Asia. Depending on the child’s home country, some Montessori classrooms have other puzzle maps with more detail that clarify their understanding of the world: a puzzle map of the Provinces of Canada, the United States, the Provinces of Oceania, even a puzzle map of the states of India. Every Montessori child, no matter on which continent they live, begins with the world map. When, for example, in a Montessori classroom in the United States, France or Canada the children does not start with their particular state, department or province since Montessori education prioritizes the world view. A four year-old starts to study the world with several lessons, likely in a small group of four or five peers by learning the continents, their characteristics and comparative sizes.
The starting point for all lessons is geography. Sori philosophy begins with the world map. Our students cut out the two hemispheres and pin-punch the continents. There is a pedagogical reason as to why Montessori children make at least one world map, either a puzzle map or a map of the world presents the continents of the world. From a cognitive perspective, going from the general, the concrete and the hands-on and progressively towards the specific and the abstract concept, increases the student's understanding and retention for two main reasons: multiple senses are involved and the child has a "hook" on which to hang the new concept.

Montessori instructional practices underline the notion of universality when they start with the general and proceed to the specific. Philosophically, by beginning with the world map, we emphasize the importance of world citizenship, of the equal importance of all the continents, and the important concept of "me in the world.

Finally, the young child's ease of acquisition of the target language stands as another example of Openness. However, it is far deeper than the mere fact that they are 'open' to learning a second language. The children's linguistic receptivity serves to influence the adults' overall attitudes. In other words, the young children, whose concrete demonstration to Openness manifests itself in their clear linguistic receptivity, serve as the teacher for the adults. The immersion children are literally constant reminders to the Montessori adults of their need to be emotionally/philosophically receptive adults. The children, likewise, nurture among the adults the art of withholding judgment and of acceptance of all people. In a Montessori classroom, the circle of teaching and learning never ends: linguistic flexibility leads to philosophical flexibility for both the teacher and the student now and in the future.

Curiosity and Discovery: The third and final attitude Deardorff identifies as requisite for the building intercultural competency is Curiosity and Discovery, which she clarifies as "tolerating ambiguity and uncertainty." A Montessori language immersion classroom supports this through the instructional paradigm, which is rooted in curiosity and exploration. In all Montessori classrooms, the teacher "follows the child" to listen to his/her interests and questions. When a Montessori teacher observes children in Sensitive Periods, which, in Montessori terms refers to special learning opportunities, we teach to that moment. Teaching to an interest, sparks the child's internal motivation from which curiosity and investigation naturally flow.

The teaching dynamic in the Montessori classroom, built on individual lessons with one or two children, lets the other children work on activities independently. It is this freedom to manipulate, practice and find the answer that promotes curiosity. Furthermore, a typical morning in a Montessori classroom follows what is called a work cycle: an uninterrupted block of time between 2 1/2 - 3 hours. Granting the students extensive time, individual work space and pacing for an interest-driven activity promotes a terrific sense of Creativity and Discovery. In order to sustain this instructional dynamic even further, many Montessori materials are designed to be self-correcting. Thus, an individual student can work for longer periods of time, discover his/her own mistakes, making adjustments in the learning process. Finally, s/he creates variations and extensions of the concepts being learned from this discovery process.

Montessori materials present much ambiguity and uncertainty! First, when an adult or child walks into any Montessori classroom, s/he will see learning materials unlike any other classroom. Yet, all Montessori schools all over the world have nearly the same materials. The student is immediately drawn to these 'never-seen-before' educational materials which are all designed to teach concepts by manipulating concrete
objects as the first step in learning. Even the names of these works are completely unfamiliar to a non-Montessori ear. For example, our French immersion primary Montessori classroom has materials that include: la toser rose (the pink tower), la deuxième boîte de couleurs (color box 2) and l’étalage du système décimal (decimal system layout). Thus, not only does the second language promote some ambiguity in the immersion classroom, but the uniqueness of the materials in all Montessori does as well. It is precisely this ambiguity that stimulates the interest among the students in all Montessori classrooms.

Since academic concepts from all curricula areas are presented first through actual, hands-on manipulatives, the students experience a great urge to explore, create and discover. What starts as ambiguity for the student when s/he manipulates the novel educational material, expands into a discovery phase when the student taps his own creativity and divergent thinking skills. In addition to the great self-satisfaction and ownership each student feels as a result of this instructional freedom and trust from the adults, s/he experiences ambiguity in the most positive light. Montessori classrooms promote creativity and discovery in multiple curricular aspects; in the instructional dynamic and within the materials themselves.

The mix of ages furthers ambiguity and curiosity. A four year-old sees a five year-old carrying his tray to his rug which has the actual mathematical quantity in the Montessori base-ten bead materials of 3,256: three thousand cubes, two hundred squares, five tens and six unit beads. When the younger child sees this “huge” activity, it not only incites motivation to go to the math shelf himself, but it also engenders a great amount of curiosity: ¿Que es? In a Montessori classroom, we frequently see students simply watching other students work. These observations range from moments of vicarious learning, when a student may be silently rehearsing the creative activity or solving the problem in his/her own head, or, they may be moments of pure curiosity in watching what their friend is doing.

In a language immersion Montessori classroom, ambiguity is almost the operative word. The students in the primary classroom, who are between the ages of three to six years old, are still acquiring their mother tongue. In normal language development, children have between 2,500 and 5,000 words by age six. Thus, the reason why students do not flinch when they are amidst the ambiguity of the language immersion classroom is because they are used to continuously encountering new words in their native language. When learning his/her own language, children rarely ask what a word means.

It is the same in the immersion classroom. They are literally accustomed to uncertainty and novelty. However, once children are over five years old, entering an immersion classroom becomes a different experience. They are aware they do not understand everything. However, like their younger peers, they typically easily tolerate some confusion. The older a person gets, the harder it is to tolerate linguistic ambiguity. In other words, a teenager or adult would have a much more uncomfortable experience walking into an immersion classroom and not understanding. However, a teenager or adult who had already experienced immersion education at a younger age will be significantly more at ease with the ambiguity. While there are many reasons for this ease, the most relevant for our discussion here of intercultural competency is the research which shows that bilingual brains demonstrate more cognitive flexibility and better executive functioning than monolingual brains.

In her book entitled, The Science Behind the Genius, Professor Angelina Lillard shows, through extensive evidence based research, that the Montessori classroom provides both cognitive and emotional advantages for children from a wide range of backgrounds. In addition to these proven results in higher student achievement and better conflict resolution skills, we can point to Montessori education as also providing the building blocks to a culturally competent individual. The foundational skills named by Deardorff of Respect, Openness, Curiosity and Discovery were written into the Montessori philosophy over a 100 years ago and are practiced in thousands of Montessori classroom all over the world every day. The Montessori teaching methodology, materials and paradigm together address the development of the deep internal shift in a person that guarantees the desired outcome in behavior and communication – the peak of the pyramid of intercultural competency.

WORKS CITED
Here being done as a collaborative project, the decimal layout of units, tens, hundreds and thousands does provide much curiosity and discovery despite the fixed mathematical categories of the base 10 system.

**FIGURE 1: DEARDORFF’S INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCY MODEL**

**Desired External Outcome:**
behaving and communicating appropriately .. to achieve one’s goals to some degree

**Desired Internal Income:**
Informed frame of reference (Adaptability, flexibility, Ethnnorelative view, Empathy

**Knowledge and Comprehension**
Cultural self-awareness; Deep understanding of culture; cultural specific information and socio-linguistic information

**Skills:** listen, observe, interpret, analyze, evaluate, relate

**Requisite Attitudes:**
Respect (valuing other cultures, cultural diversity
Openness (to intercultural learning and to people from other cultures, withholding judgment)
Creativity and Discovery (tolerating ambiguity and uncertainty)