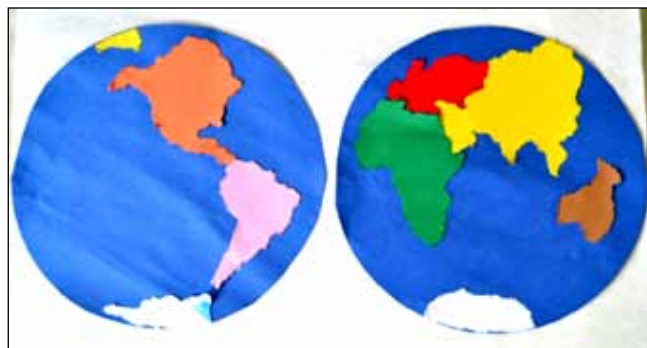


Building Intercultural Competency in the Language Immersion Montessori Classroom



A pin-punched map by a Montessori primary student using the world puzzle map. All Montessori schools, all over the world use the same maps and start with the world map as the introduction to geography and science.

By Kateri Carver-Akers, PhD

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*

ery, 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 certainly requires practice and self-discipline mirrors the expectations we have of the students: that they too cultivate respect of every individual.

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 respect that permeates every aspect of the learning environment. The Montessori teacher, most often 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, waiting for the teacher to answer her question. Another 4 ½ year-old does a food preparation activity and then offers a serving to two other friends seated at tables nearby. An adult visiting the school that day sits in a chair observing 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 practicing ‘the interrupting lesson.’ There is a Montessori lesson on interrupting, 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 a 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 matters as much as the next in the Montessori classroom. The interrupting 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 environment 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 physical 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 working together in the sensorial area of the classroom. They carefully carry blocks of various 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 transport these blocks, so is the designated area where they will construct with these blocks. They have previously 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 represents another element in the Montessori classroom that contributes to the cultivation of respect, and also, fills the practical need of sending the silent but clear message 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 interrupting 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 at-



Color Box 2 and the array of Sensorial materials provide infinite opportunities for creativity and exploration. The students find much relaxation on this creative process which also promotes divergent thinking skills and problem solving.

mosphere 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? Ve y trae tres cosas: una hoja grande de papel azul, las tijeras y el círculo del hemisferio para trazar?*"

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



Students working independently at their rugs, which define their work space while the teachers are giving one-on-one lesson to other students



The student stands with her hand on the teacher's shoulder and the teacher acknowledges her presence by touching her hand while she waits.

and forms. Because they are puzzle pieces and are color coded - which incidentally is universal among all Montessori schools all over the world- the children easily learn the continents by their shape and color. All Montessori children in primary classrooms make at least one world map by tracing and pin-punching or cutting the continents and pasting them on a background of the two hemisphere circles colored blue. After having made several times the world map of continents, typically a five year old student in a Montessori classroom will then begin to make several other maps. These other maps, also pin-punched from the puzzle map, give the detail of the countries that make up the continents. It is not unusual for all Montessori students to recognize and name several countries by their shape and also to which specific continent they belong.

We have seen that the Montessori instructional method supports the philosophy of respect for all people, for the learning materials and for the classroom environment. Our student, who cut out the two hemisphere circles from the blue paper, now glues down her pin-punched continents. There is a pedagogical reason as to why the Montessori philosophy begins with the world map. Montessori education begins with the most concrete and the most general concept as the starting point for all lessons; geography is no exception. Beginning with a map of a state or a province, represents a far more ab-

stract starting place since it calls to an administrative or political boundary instead of a natural boundary, such as an ocean coast. Thus, a state border is much more challenging to comprehend than the real, tangible and mostly natural boundaries that the continents of the world present. From a cognition perspective, going from the general, the concrete and the hands-on and progressively towards the specific and the abstract concept (as opposed to the reverse), 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.

Also, 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 immer-

sion 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 immersion 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 ½ - 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 tour 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



A 5½-year-old's map of the countries of South America. This hands-on project, which takes several days to complete, fosters independence, attention to detail and finally a terrific sense of Geography.

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.

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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

