



Montessori for Early Childhood Development

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Abstract

In Thailand, early childhood education for children was guided by variety of philosophies, theories and approaches. Educators considered the ages from birth to six crucial due to the optimal brain growth. This critical period is the prime time for basic skills development. Montessori Method, initiated by Dr. Maria Montessori, is one approach that is proved effective to be used. Dr. Montessori developed this approach by using the scientific method through observation of the young children's behaviors while working with educational materials. Her teaching and learning method was orderly designed based on her beliefs then forming the principles, objectives, curriculum structure, teaching method, classroom management and assessment. The principles of the Montessori Method have been shown to be globally applicable and to be continued in many different countries. Two cases of the appropriate way to implement the Montessori Method for the early childhood program were proposed in this paper.

Introduction

Education is one of life's essentials. People seeks knowledge through different means such as in person or from contemporary media that changes through times, in hope to be up-to-date in order to better themselves, their family, workplaces and the whole society. Early childhood education received more attention from several professionals, especially from the medical communities during the implementation of the National Education Act of A.D.1999. The well- publicized findings of brain study indicated that the crucial period for human brain development was from birth to 6 years when the brain's growth-rate is at the highest and important

foundations skills should be instilled. Various professionals collaborated to seek for approaches that were suitable in developing children for a strong foundation that would enable them to become a quality/ valuable citizen for the country and the world.

Thai early childhood education was guided by studied philosophies, theories, and approaches as well as by experiences and information obtained through various means. In A.D. 2000, the Office of the National Education Council studied young children's learning according to several philosophies, theories and approaches and indicated 5 approaches which had been successfully implemented, were suitable for Thai context, and could be a model for other early childhood programs. Five case studies were published as followed: (1) the

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Waldorf approach in the early childhood classroom (2) the Montessori approach in the early childhood classroom (3) the Reggio Emilia approach in the early childhood classroom (4) the Hi Scope approach in the early childhood classroom, and (5) the Whole Language approach in the early childhood classroom. Moreover, other approaches and concepts such as the Project approach, the multiple intelligent theory, the learning center, brain-based education, the Buddhist concepts education, the sufficient economy philosophy, STEM, STEAM, and EF were also studied. Moreover, models of teacher and student development to enable both parties with 21st centuries skills and prepare them for Thailand 4.0 were presented.

In the transitioning era to Thailand 4.0, Montessori Education is one of the teaching methods that receive attention from public, private and local early childhood programs since the method is in accordance with the educating of young children that is responsive to brain development and reflexes local as well as international practices. The implementations of the approach in Thailand were either adopting the whole method while adapting it to Thai and local contexts or integrating Montessori method to the methods previously utilized, depend on the circumstances. Montessori approach was expected to be one of the methods that support children to develop to their full potential and responsive to children's needs, interests, and developmental nature. For those interested in implementing Montessori methods, this article suggested the implementation processes but began with the basic information of Montessori method.

Montessori Teaching

Montessori teaching is an approach found by Dr. Maria Montessori (1870-1952), the first Italian female physician who observed children in authentic context while practiced with intellectual disabilities children. She observed that the children's brains were active if they used their hands in activities such as holding or twisting objects. In 1898, Montessori developed materials that could be manipulated by hand and tried them out with special need children. She found that the children were able to learn equally well as those without disabilities and next developed teaching methods to be used with children in 1907. The developed materials were age appropriate and accorded with children's nature and needs. Montessori observed children of different

age-groups working with the material to assess their preferences and suitability. These observations helped her in designing the age appropriateness and the order of the materials to be used. The teaching method for lifelong learning was then developed and introduced till the Montessori approach are used extensively and there are Montessori teacher training established all over the world. (Maria, 1964; 1965; 1981; 1983; 1984)

Montessori Beliefs

Montessori developed a teaching approach based on the following beliefs:

- 1) A person's education is more than his/her time spent in classroom. Human are stimulated by natural curiosity and the love of learning.
- 2) A child has a right to develop his/her individuality in learning, a right to choose activities freely, to explore their world and to have suitable working environment.
- 3) The purpose of early learning is not to teach young children fact/knowledge but to foster their development according to their natural needs.
- 4) A child's mind is comparable to a sponge that will absorb information from the environment. A child uses his/her mind to search and absorb knowledges.
- 5) The most critical period of a child's life is not during a period of learning in a university. Rather, it is the first period of their lives which is from birth to 6 years old.
- 6) Children learn best in a well-planned environment that designed for their freedom from adult controls.
- 7) Humans educate themselves. No one is educated by others. He/She has the control of what is learned. Children learn best when they are allowed to discover things themselves.

Principles and Objectives

The beliefs mentioned above are found in Montessori teaching principles (Morrison, 1998) as followed: (1) Respect for the Child (2) The Absorbent Mind (3) Sensitive Periods (4) The Prepared Environment and (5) Self- or Auto Education. These 5 principles result in 5 general teaching objectives: (1) motor development (2) emotional development (3) social development (4) cognitive development and (5) development of independent working.

Curriculum Structure

The basic Montessori curriculum for children age 3-6 are divided into 3 clusters as followed:

Cluster 1 Motor Development Study specify 3 objectives:

1. Children are able to care for and manage themselves and their environment.
2. Children are able to develop morally.
3. Children have good and balance body coordination as well as knowing rhythm and movement.

The content for this cluster include practical life, hands on activities, physical education, and rhythmic movement.

Cluster 2 Sensorial Study specify 2 objectives:

1. Children are able to make detailed observation using their sensory.
2. Children are foster to develop their thinking and able to notice the differences, prominent points, group, and rank.

The content for this cluster include using ear, eye, nose, tongue, hand; observe width, length, height, size, color, sound, and taste of sensorial materials.

Cluster 3 Writing and Mathematical Preparation

This cluster is an academic area to prepare children in entering formal educational system.

The content for the cluster include hand readiness, language and mathematical study, botany, geography, reading and composing music, instrument, and notes.

The teaching method has 3 steps and the order of procedure should be:

- (1) Recognition of identities, (2) Recognition of Contrasts, (3) Discrimination between objects very similar to one another.

Classroom Management

Classroom arrangement can be done in several ways. The mixed-age classroom is popular in other countries while Thailand has both mixed and same age classroom. The working environment is prepared so children will have freedom with limits under the care of trained teachers. In Thailand, there are private organizations that provide trainings for teachers in private and public/local schools. These organization are either an international cooperation entity or a cooperation of other trained practitioners to promulgate Montessori approach and to ensure accurate practices that is suitable for Thai context.

Assessment

Observations of children's performances and materials usages in each content clusters are used to evaluate students. The observations are recorded for teachers' utilization and for parent report. While the practices are varied, most schools report students learning outcomes to family every Friday by sending students' works home. Schools also set up specific period for parents to observe the learning in the classroom. Teachers and parents discuss children abilities and development. Students' material usage assessment form is recorded, summarized and, report to parents.

According to the results of a follow-up study of the developmental outcome of children enrolled in schools that adopted the Montessori method in Thailand: Kornkaew Nursery School. Roi-et muang municipality child development center and Pierra-Navin child care, the children had good concentration and self-discipline. They were able to control their emotion well in waiting for their turns and were well organized as they chose and returned materials to and from their places and made sure that the materials used would be in working condition for others. The children regulated their own learning and were able to correct any mistake made. They showed interests by asking for teachers' material demonstration, were attentive, observed calmly during the demonstration, absorbed such information, and able to worked with these materials themselves after the observation. They demonstrated their will in completing the activities and were able to be the demonstrator for other children as well as assisting them while working together.

The Implementation of Montessori Method in Early Childhood Establishment

A successful implementation of philosophies, theories, or approaches needs collaboration among school managements, teachers, and other professional involved. Such collaboration begins with a realization of the importance of such approach and the benefits that children will received. All personals involved, then, should have knowledges, understanding and practical guidelines of the approach. It is also crucial that the beliefs and the knowledges are shared and all parties works together in all aspects of the implementation. Guidelines/Models for feasible and sustainable practices derived from the author's experiences in working with several early childhood programs are presented as followed.

Case 1 An early childhood education program that is newly established and the administrator is interested in adopting Montessori method to educate 2-6 years old. It might begin with designing buildings that accorded with the approach. Next, those involved attend workshops to understand the approach and then share their perspectives and ideas on the possibilities of the implementation. The trainings of teachers, assistant teachers, and careers begin after the agreement of the implementation. The trainings should cover both the theoretical as well as the practical domains of Montessori method. The staff are trained to use materials of different subject areas, make and obtain the materials and set up the classrooms. The class teachers practice using the materials so they can demonstrate precisely for the children. The Kanlayanamitr supervisions being done regularly are crucial in the beginning phase to ensure the confidence of teachers who have the responsibilities in caring and cultivating children to be a valuable member of the society.

Case 2 An early childhood education program that is already established but want to adopted Montessori approach to the school. The case proves to be more challenging than case 1 since the staffs already have their practical framework and might feel that a new approach will cause confusion and difficulties to their work or generate more workload. In this case, it is better to start by informing all involved concerning the importance and benefit of the new approach in developing children and generating challenges for the teachers. When the staff are opened to and accept the idea of change, they should be trained to have the knowledge and the know-how of Montessori method and how to integrate it to the current practices. The training with practices will give the staff confidences in classroom. Processes that have been executed successfully and sustainably are described as followed.

1) An early childhood education program that derived the program curriculum from the early childhood education curriculum of the Ministry of Education that consisted of 6 main activities in providing learning experiences for children 2-6 years of age: The administrators and some teachers who were interested in integrating Montessori approach to the daily activities began the process by attending training workshops that provided both the theoretical knowledge as well as the hands-on practices. After the training, 1 out of 4 classrooms was willing to try out the integration and agreed to do so for 1 academic year. Montessori materials were shelves in the classroom for the teacher's

demonstration and children's use during the unstructured activities period along side with other activities. Scheduled supervisions were conducted by an outside expert. The developmental outcomes of the children after the academic year inspired the rest of the teachers to join the program in the following academic year. The materials were made to suit the program context. The program was sustainable due the cooperation of the staff and it is now an educational site for students, teachers and others who interested in integrating Montessori approach to a traditional classroom.

2) An early childhood program that derive the curriculum from the early childhood curriculum of the Ministry of Education that utilize learning center and project approach and later wanting to integrate Montessori approach to the original practice.: Due to working environment/circumstance/context, classrooms set up and existing teaching method, it was necessary to find the most suitable way to integrate Montessori method to the practice. After discussions, a Montessori room was established with a teacher who stationed in the room. Each regular classroom was scheduled to use the Montessori room for half an hour every day. The children were cared for by the Montessori room teacher as well as the class teacher. All teachers attended the training workshop for both theoretical and practical knowledge so they could work with children in regular as well as Montessori classrooms. The teachers, next, created materials for all 3 content clusters to be placed in the classrooms according to the curriculum content. The life experience materials matched with children development that nurtured children life skills in every life were also provided.

Conclusion

We are all agreed that early childhood education is crucial for building a foundation to ensure that young children will grow into quality people in the future. People and organization, thus, are searching for a jointed approach that lead to practice in early childhood education. It is important for those working in early childhood education program to have clear principles and consider carefully of how to integrate new method to the established practice to benefit children 's development most. Montessori method is one of the approach that should be suitable even in changing time due to the distinctive principles and practical guidelines that match with daily lives and the curriculum that lay foundation for higher level of education.

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