Let’s Be Spontaneous!

Encouraging Spontaneous Activity in the Elementary Environment

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“And so we discovered that education is not something which the teacher does, but that it is a natural process which develops spontaneously in the human being. It is not acquired by listening to words, but in virtue of experiences in which the child acts on his environment.”

– Dr. Maria Montessori, The Absorbent Mind
Let’s define our terms: What is spontaneous activity?

Dr. Montessori’s Rationale

- In *Spontaneous Activity in Education*, Dr. Montessori asserts that children possess the same intrinsic ability to develop and reach their potential that any other living thing does.

- This natural disposition toward development is, absent external intervention, the most likely developmental path to the child optimizing their potential.

- She states that this applies to spiritual (psychical) development as well as physical.
Life, Liberty, etc.

Dr. Montessori’s Rationale, continued

- Further, Dr. Montessori establishes that children, as human beings, have the same rights to self-determination as adults, discussing the idea of children having liberty in their growth as a civil right.

- “What are the rights of children? Let us consider them for a moment as a social class, as a class of workers, for as a fact they are laboring to produce men.” – Dr. Montessori, Spontaneous Activity in Education
Even though the child possesses both the intrinsic capacity and the right to follow it, this does not mean their path should not be guided.

“...when we say that in like manner the baby should be left at liberty spiritually, because creative Nature can also fashion its spirit better than we can, we do not mean that it should be neglected and abandoned.” - Dr. Montessori, *Spontaneous Activity in Education*
What do we mean by “spontaneous activity”?

While Dr. Montessori’s definition could be argued to apply to all student-led activity in the Montessori classroom, modern structures and standards have increasingly impinged upon the traditional Montessori classroom. Even within the framework of a Montessori school, there can be pressure to impose external structure on the activity of the children.

It is therefore of utmost importance to find ways to protect and encourage student-led spontaneous activity – i.e., not planned by the teacher.
Lesson-inspired Spontaneous Work

- The majority of spontaneous work in the elementary classroom is inspired by a lesson from the teacher. Whether guided to a specific follow-up choice or not, the student extends the work beyond the initial expectations of the teacher.

- Sparked by a lesson but fueled by imagination, the sky is the limit!
Inspiration + Guidance

- Student-led spontaneous work can also be inspired by reading material, conversation, pure curiosity – anything that gets the student’s imagination going.

- This work often needs guidance from the teacher to provide appropriate structure and connection to curricular strands, although it can venture well outside of a planned scope and sequence.
The visual arts often provide both a medium for exploration and ongoing inspiration for spontaneous activity in the classroom.
The Play’s the Thing

- Performance can be a motivating factor in the elementary classroom, as children expand their social awareness and desire for collaborative work.

- Plays and presentations can be fertile ground for spontaneously extending lesson work beyond the parameters of the original lesson.

- The necessary structure and preparation for a performance also provide good opportunities for teacher guidance.
Spontaneous Activity is Curriculum-Wide

- Remember, even though the cultural subjects are natural breeding grounds for spontaneous activity, any academic subject can prove inspiring to our students!
Supporting Spontaneity

- While children have the internal capacity to grow and develop themselves through their spontaneous activity and experiences, it falls upon us to create and guard the space and time they need to do so.

- In order to do this effectively, the key is preparation, of both the environment and the teacher.
The Prepared Environment

• Spontaneous activity is a natural outgrowth of a well-prepared environment.
• Ensuring adequate and varied supplies and materials – not only Montessori materials but a wide variety of creative media and resources – is essential to supporting students’ work.
Supply the Demand

- Keep a checklist of supplies to have available for projects.
- If storage or financing limits your ability to keep a large variety of things on hand, it is a good idea to know where you can procure supplies relatively quickly and cheaply when you anticipate they may be needed in the classroom.
- Be prepared to be flexible and responsive to the needs of the students in their work.
A favorite pursuit of elementary children is “research,” by which they mean the raw intake of information about topics that they are interested in. Given the freedom to do so, the curious child can and will spend entire work cycles looking at books (or computers) for photographs and “fun facts” about the animal or building or machine that has most recently taken their fancy.

Establishing a clear, step-by-step process for the appropriate research of material can support the associated reading and language skill development as well as development of executive function.

Project planners and graphic organizers are helpful in guiding children to focus the scope of their research or project and to aid in the writing process for research paragraphs or essays.

**Steps of the Research Process**

1. Choose a specific topic.
2. Write a list of questions (or mind map) to answer about the topic.
3. Use resources, beginning with print resources, to find information to answer your questions.
4. Take notes on the information you found. Remember to use bullet points!
5. Write one or more paragraphs using your notes as a guide. Begin with a rough draft, then edit and revise into a final draft.
6. Create a visual representation and/or an oral presentation on your topic (optional).

A brief synopsis of the steps of research used in Upper Elementary can be a helpful reminder to students involved in the process.
Project Planner

Project Idea or Goal (what I will learn about our make):

_______________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________

Materials Needed:

_______________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________

Procedure (what I will do):

_______________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________

* You may want to include a sketch of your project idea on the back.

Date I will finish: ____________ Agreement made with: ________________
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Animal/Topic Sentence</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Include the name of your animal in your topic sentence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What does the animal look like? Appearance, color, length, weight</th>
<th>Where does this animal live? Continent/country/ocean, habitat/biome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What does this animal eat?</th>
<th>Other Interesting Facts and Conclusion Sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How does the animal reproduce? Does it care for its young?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Resources & Technology

- It is crucial to have a variety of available print resources in the classroom to allow for the research process. The local public library can be an invaluable source of these resources for schools that lack an in-house library or are on a more stringent budget.

- In addition, computer-based and digital resources are increasingly present in the classroom. As long as appropriate boundaries and expectations are established and consistently applied, there are a variety of ways technological resources can contribute positively to supporting students’ activity.

Computers allow for:

- Development of electronic communication skills, including keyboarding, writing emails, and word processing

- Additional informational resources, and the development of the ability to recognize reputable sources of information

- Capacity for additional presentation media (slideshows, audio and video recordings, etc.)
Executive Function

- It may sound counterintuitive, but spontaneous, student-led activity presents a great opportunity for reinforcing personal organization and executive function.

- As with academic skills and concepts, elementary students own their organizational skills far more thoroughly and effectively if they use them experientially in the service of a passion project.
Organizing to Support Spontaneous Activity without Work Plans

- Having a clearly organized record of lesson work available in the classroom can help students (and teachers) keep track of each child’s lesson work options and progress, while allowing for the choice that is necessary for spontaneous activity to occur.
# Example of Lesson Record Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st Years</th>
<th>Parts of a Triangle</th>
<th>Stamp Game</th>
<th>Subtraction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>5-Mar</td>
<td>5-Mar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arnav</td>
<td>3/5 LO Δ</td>
<td>Dynamic Λ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calvin</td>
<td>Λ Static</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella F.</td>
<td>3/7 LO Δ</td>
<td>Dynamic Λ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiona</td>
<td>Λ Static</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iris</td>
<td>Λ Static</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josiah</td>
<td>Λ Dynamic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Monday =  | Tuesday =  | Wednesday = | Thursday = | Friday =  |
A Word about Standards…

How do we balance standards and spontaneity?

- It grows harder as the years pass in elementary to allow the time and space needed for spontaneous activity – yet the nature of the elementary student being more and more prepared & motivated as they age to go deeper into their academic pursuits lends itself well to following the child.

- It is easy to fall into the trap of feeling like a child needs to produce a hard-copy, pencil-and-paper work for every lesson, but following the child can mean being flexible enough and observant enough to assess the child’s knowledge and skill acquisition in a way appropriate to each child. It doesn’t all have to look the same.

- We can continue in Dr. Montessori’s footsteps by introducing materials first and providing the time and space for the child to then explore those materials on their own schedule. We do not have to insist on a busy work follow-up to every lesson.

- One key is to be conversant enough with current state, local, or even Common Core standards to be able to tie children’s spontaneous work to the relevant strands.
“The Guide by the Side”
Spiritual Preparation of the Teacher

- A large part of what Montessori elementary teachers do is guide student-led activity, creating the space for the children to become themselves.
Being Open to Possibilities

- The essence of cosmic education lies in the assertion that in order for the child’s imagination to flourish, it must be exercised and allowed the opportunity to grow.

- To support this goal, we must train ourselves to recognize the educational value in spontaneously chosen activities. Even the seemingly random can have value.
Trust through Reflection

- It is essential to cultivate trust: trust in the activity of the children, trust in the process and the method of Montessori education, trust in one’s own ability to guide without seizing the wheel.

- Taking the time to reflect mindfully on one’s practice - through journaling, discussion with peers, meditation, etc. – can build one’s self-trust and encourage one’s own creativity to inspire students.
Reflect and Inspire!

How are you creating the space for the children to “become themselves” and how is the environment inspiring the children? What has inspired you?

"The secret of success is found to lie in the right use of imagination in awakening interest, and the stimulation of seeds of interest already sown..."

-Maria Montessori, *To Educate the Human Potential*
Special Thanks

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If you have any questions, any ideas to share, or would like to request digital copies of resources, please feel free to contact us at:

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