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Montessori classrooms differ greatly in organization from traditional classrooms. At Duhovka, teachers monitor children working on several different lessons at once.



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# Duhovka advances alternative learning

■ Local Montessori school promotes hands-on learning and teaches life skills

■ Tactile experiences are effective as an introduction to otherwise abstract concepts

BY ANNA SHAMANSKA  
FOR THE POST

**M**aria Montessori, who researched and wrote about the scientific pedagogy at the beginning of the 20th century, left a valuable legacy in the form of an innovative teach-

ing practice. The method she developed but never patented is famous for its individual approach to each child in a classroom. "I work with a child at the level where he is," said Dorothy Paul, the Montessori methodologist of Duhovka's schools. "Not where I think he

should be; I respect where he is.”

The Duhovka preschool in Prague 6 currently has a capacity of 72 children who are divided into three classrooms of 24 students each. The youngest age at which a child can start the preschool is two and a half years. “Our classes are a mixed group of students with a balance of age and gender. It is one of the Montessori principles, the three-year age difference,” said Michaela Hrivňáková, the director of the Duhovka preschool.

Paul explains the Montessori environment introduces younger children to certain knowledge and materials before they may even be ready to learn them. She says the children’s early exposure to such advanced material helps establish a level of comfort before it is time to learn it later. As for older children, they in turn also become teachers. Knowing that they have a direct impact on their peers teaches them to be responsible. “It teaches them in the final year to be a leader,” Paul explained.

Duhovka stands out among other schools not only due to its Montessori method, but also its bilingual system of teaching. Each classroom has three teachers at all times: a native Czech and two native English speakers. Students decide for themselves if they want to use Czech or English during their school day, as both languages are constantly offered. In Hrivňáková’s words, the students work in the system of the language, which means that when children are introduced to a new concept, like, for example, recycling, they get acquainted with it through actions and speaking about it. “Even if you don’t know what the word means, you are doing it right now,” Paul said.

A Duhovka day starts as early as 8 a.m. At 9 a.m., the classes get together to sing songs around a piano or guitar in either Czech or English. Until about 10:30, they spend their time in classrooms, busy with Montessori lessons. A classroom is divided into several areas dedicated to lessons like art, language or with special tools for more practical work, and the children are free to switch from activity to activity as it suits them.

The children also get to spend time outside in the school’s garden, where they take care of a goat and a sheep, and later they have either a vegetarian or



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At Duhovka’s Prague 6 preschool, learning happens both in and out of the classroom. In the garden, students care for a goat and sheep.

non-vegetarian meal. From about 3 p.m. on, children can participate in extracurricular activities, such as drama, ceramics or yoga.

“My role [as a teacher] is to create an environment that removes all the barriers of his learning. The child’s mind and body are set up to do certain things at certain times. We have to make sure he is safe, and we always change the equipment to make it interesting and appropriate,” Paul said.

Duhovka’s teaching method relies heavily on a special set of educational materials, most of which were developed by Maria Montessori. “All the materials are set up with a control of error built in; they are visually appealing and of very high quality,” Paul said. “They are not toys; they are tools.”

One such tool is a collection of various beads that help the children learn how to count and solve simple math problems. Hrivňáková explains that the Montessori method is focused on teaching children through the senses and encourages them to touch everything, and so the beads allow preschoolers to visualize and feel what numbers are like. They play with beads of one, 10 or 100, which introduce numbers as a concrete thing rather than a mere symbol.

The Montessori method also explains various abstract

concepts like history in this way. Duhovka students, for example, learned to understand history by putting together a small timeline of their own life. They used pictures of themselves at various ages to see that they, too, have a history.

The system also emphasizes the importance of making mistakes. Instead of quickly solving the problem for the children, the instructor guides them toward the answers. “Kids say ‘Help me do it on my own,’” Paul said. “They don’t want you to do it for them.”

The classrooms are set up in a way that children also acquire and practice social skills — something traditional systems rarely focus on. “We are a community

in the classroom, and it’s all about helping each other, using manners, using social graces,” Paul said. During meals, children practice serving others, learn how to set up their own table and clean up after themselves.

After leaving Duhovka preschool, the children possess the same basic knowledge and skills as their peers in traditional schools. But, according to Paul, they know much more about the world around them and about themselves. “They are developing a sense of self, of who they are,” she said. “They come out independent; they are learning to dress themselves, to speak for themselves and to take care of themselves.”

Montessori-style teaching may seem rather alternative

to some parents, but Paul says it is the right choice for any child, as she explains that it offers a structured system that comes from the most basic human needs. She says the system is based not only on respecting their needs, but also on responding to them.

“The traditional system is not good for children to give them freedom and responsibilities,” Hrivňáková explains. “I think parents want more for them than sitting in a classroom at a desk, where the teacher is in front of 30 heads. In a traditional system, it is the teacher who is at the center of the classroom; in Montessori, it is the child.”

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