The Difference Between a Classroom and a “Prepared Environment”

Edward Fidellow

Montessori teachers will talk to you, with pride, about “their” prepared environment. To most of us it looks like a classroom with strange and interesting stuff but to a Montessori teacher it is part of the mystery, part of the keys to Montessori success.

A traditional classroom is just a room where talking takes place. A prepared environment is where action happens and real learning takes place. First, the prepared environment is built with the child in mind. (Did you know that small table and chairs were a Montessori innovation?) Second, each piece of material holds a key to learning. It may be a key of dimension or language, culture or math. Third, the environment is constructed in a coherent order where each material, each educational concept leads to another concept more advanced all the while building a solid educational foundation. Fourth, the material remains in the environment to give the student time to master the concept before moving on. (Traditional classrooms you are given the lesson and you move on – learned or not.)

Aristotle wrote, “There is nothing in the mind that is not first in the hands.” The Montessori environment provides both the time and the material for this essential transfer to occur. The manipulation of the materials creates an added dimension to the learning. A traditional classroom is a two-dimensional world - maybe things posted on the walls and bulletin boards but a prepared environment takes you beyond the three dimensions of the materials into the dimensions of wonder, imagination and curiosity. It is a laboratory of real life.

The traditional classroom is guarded by the teacher but when she leaves the learning stops. The prepared environment has a guide that opens the doors of learning by sharing the keys that unlock the mysteries of math and language, science and culture – and of the world. And when she leaves the learning continues because she leaves the keys. And the teacher is confident that the prepared environment will lead to the unique place that Dr. Montessori discovered where the children “Won’t need me anymore” because they are equipped to continue to learn for a life time.