

# What is Montessori-Inspired Elementary?

By Christiana Hillier, ASA Development Director and Latin Teacher

You may have recently seen publicity materials calling ASA's Elementary program "Montessori-Inspired". Many parents and students of our school have had the opportunity to experience our Montessori Pre-K. Guests who observe our Montessori classroom often remark on the calm environment, and express surprise at the way in which such small children go about their work with focus and interest. According to the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) and the American Montessori Society (AMS), there are characteristics that separate a Montessori program from other educational models. Some essential elements of a Montessori classroom are: 1). Mixed-age classrooms (ranging from a 3-year span to a 6-year span), 2). Uninterrupted blocks of work time, 3). Student directed learning within a prescribed and limited range of options, 4). Learning through the hands-on use of materials, not just instructional time. These components of a Montessori program serve to foster responsibility at a young age, help children solidify their own learning by having an opportunity to teach younger children, and allows for maximized learning at crucial periods of a child's developmental growth.

While our Elementary program is not Montessori, there are elements of the Montessori model that teachers use to help enhance student learning, discover children's interests and strengths, and foster responsibility. Both of our Elementary classrooms are mixed-age classrooms. Students learn many important skills by sharing a classroom with children in different grades. Younger children are able to learn from older children, while older children are able to reinforce their learning by synthesizing their knowledge and passing it on to a younger child in an organized and coherent way. This is an essential skill to master that will serve them well, not just throughout their education, but into adulthood. The ability to socialize, teach, and learn from people of all different ages, strengths and dispositions is a skill that is essential both in our Elementary program and in life.

ASA's Elementary classrooms allow for freedom and choice that other models are not able to accommodate. For instance, the Elementary students' literacy block is known as "Daily 5", and allows for choice within limits. In fact, the Daily 5 program was designed by teachers in a three grade multi-age classroom. Students are able to choose the order in which they accomplish their five daily literacy activities, as long as each activity is completed. This gives children the opportunity to learn prioritization, personal ownership of their learning, and feel a sense of autonomy. Our math curriculum, Singapore Math, also has elements of the Montessori approach. Children first learn concrete concepts through the use of manipulatives. Once they have mastered these simpler concepts they then move from the concrete to the abstract. This way of learning takes into consideration a child's developmental needs, and allows for a deeper and more lasting understanding of mathematics.

Taking personal responsibility for one's person, belongings, and learning is a crucial component of both Montessori and ASA's Elementary program. We want our students to take ownership of their actions and behaviors, their learning, and their classroom. In a multi-age system students will likely spend more than one year in a classroom. This gives them the opportunity to make the classroom their own, and help set the tone of the environment within which they will work and learn. Montessori referred to the primary classroom as a "Children's House". This philosophy carries over into ASA's Elementary program. Our students are given tasks and roles that help them maintain their classroom "house". Their teacher is not a babysitter or a lecturer, but a partner in helping them learn and grow. Because of our small size our students are able, with the direction of the teachers, to help guide discussions, direct special projects, and work together to use their special gifts and their interests. We highly value our student's education, and we work hard to help them take responsibility for it, so that learning is not something they merely do at school, but a life-long endeavor.