

Excerpts from Master Thesis Project:
***Problem Solving in the Pre-Primary Montessori Classroom
& The Peace Rose Method***
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Problem solving is the foundation of a young child's learning. It must be valued, promoted, provided for, and sustained in the early childhood classroom. Opportunities for problem solving occur in the everyday context of a child's life. By observing the child closely, teachers can use the child's social, cognitive, movement, and emotional experiences to facilitate problem solving and promote strategies useful in the lifelong process of learning. By exploring social relationships, manipulating objects, and interacting with people, children are able to formulate ideas, try these ideas out, and accept or reject what they learn. *Constructing knowledge by making mistakes is part of the natural process of problem solving*. Through exploring, then experimenting, trying out a hypothesis, and finally, solving problems, children make learning personal and meaningful. Piaget states that children understand only what they discover or invent themselves. It is this discovery within the problem solving process that is the vehicle for children's learning.

The importance of Problem Solving Skills

Conflict in children's relationships is a topic of great interest in the field of early childhood education and development. Conflicts provide a critical context for the development of social and cognitive competencies. As disagreements are an inevitable part of any early childhood classroom it is important to recognize and ponder how teachers might utilize these situations to help children grow and develop into more independent problem solvers.

Over the last 10 years, early childhood education, has stressed the importance of cooperative play and learning for the young child's development. Cooperative learning involves children in the active exchange of ideas rather than passive learning. This sharing of differing points of view in the attempt to achieve a common goal results in cognitive advance. Cooperative problem solving often occurs in classrooms when two children have a dispute. Piaget maintained that opportunities for becoming less egocentric are more common when children discuss things with each other because then they must face the fact that not everyone has the same perspective on a situation. Psychologists have based most of their research in this area on Piaget's theory, and have examined children's performance on tasks, working in pairs and individually. Several researchers have found that children who were paired with a more advanced child were later able to solve problems at a higher level, while the children who worked individually did not improve. Thus the research shows that when children work together to attempt to solve problems they learn from the experience and each other. A curriculum that accommodates a variety of developmental levels as well as individual differences in young children sets the stage for problem solving. Choices, decision making and a curriculum framework that integrates learning are especially appropriate for young learners. Beginning with the needs and interests of the children, problem solving develops from meaningful experiences important to the children. The teacher designed curriculum provides the classroom basis for these experiences.

Two decades of empirical research has shown that children's success or failure in being accepted by their peers is determined in part by their skill in social problem solving. It is also believed that the child's capacity to pay attention and perform academically often depends upon a child's ability to get along with classmates and enjoy the classroom atmosphere. This is because children who have problem solving skills spend less time working through problems with other children and more time on task in the classroom. Some researchers have gone as far as to state that these life skills can help prevent wars, divorces, drug use, violent outbursts, and painful childhoods.

Why are young children unable to problem solve effectively?

The young child's inability to effectively problem solve are the result of a number of different factors. Because children are developmentally unable to naturally problem solve it would be unreasonable to expect them to solve problems without assistance or training. Children are egocentric and require training and experience with conflict in order to learn how to solve problems. Young children have not yet had enough experience with conflict to be able to make effective choices. Because of their state of egocentrism young children are, in continuous conflict with adults and other children over the incompatibility between the child's drives and society's rules. This coupled with the fact that young children do not know how to express their feelings accurately or appropriately leads to conflict and inappropriate social actions. Research has also shown that developmentally, young children lack the language skills and vocabulary to express them selves clearly and effectively.

Research has shown that teachers believe that social conflict among young children is the largest barrier in their ability to effectively teach in the classroom. When interviewed, classroom teachers reported that roughly every four minutes they were required to intervene in a classroom or playground dispute. They also reported that teacher intervention in social disputes kept them from other teaching activities 50% of their day.

The Teacher's Role

Children are encouraged to construct their own knowledge when the teacher plans for problem solving. The teacher develops the framework for learning in problem solving, provides time, space, and materials. Change and growth through problem solving is modeled by adults and facilitated by the teacher in the classroom environment. When teachers articulate the problems they face and discuss solutions with children, children become more aware of the significance of the problem solving process. Being a problem solver is modeled by the teacher and emulated by the children. Values and goals are clearly defined to include a child-centered curriculum, the development of communication skills, promotion of cooperative learning, and inclusion of diverse ideas. By being curious, observing, listening, and questioning, the teacher shares and models the qualities that are valued and promoted by the problem solving process.

The Peace Rose Method of Problem Solving

The Peace Rose method of problem solving allows children to recognize and express their own feelings as well as learn respect for the other child's feelings. A vase holding the peace rose is made available to the children at all times. The children are taught how to handle and care for the Peace Rose. When a conflict arises one child will get the Peace

Rose. While holding the Peace Rose the child can express what they did not like or how they feel to the other child. When they are done they pass the rose to the other child. Respect for the other persons turn to talk is stressed. The children are encouraged to use "I" words such as "I didn't like it when you hit me". Abusive or unkind language is not used when holding the Peace Rose. When the two children reach a solution or simply get over their difficulty they put their hands on the rose and say, 'we declare peace', or 'friends'.

The Peace Rose method was specifically developed for the Montessori classroom. This method encourages children to be independent and to attempt to solve problems effectively with little teacher intervention. The Peace Rose uses very simple actions to help young children be independent and successful. The Peace Rose Method gives the children the opportunity to practice problem solving skills in the school environment but under controlled conditions. Because the children are taught that the Rose may not be used in combination with verbal abuse or physical aggression it is an excellent way for them to practice. Although the Peace Rose can be used when needed, it must be used respectfully and with care. There are specific guidelines that the children must follow when using the Peace Rose. This concept runs parallel to that of the Montessori philosophy in that there is freedom within boundaries. The Peace Rose maintains this philosophy which helps validate it with the children. Consistency in the Montessori classroom is imperative to the success of our program.

Teachers Love the Peace Rose!

The Peace Rose Method removes the teacher from the center of a conflict. The Peace Rose instead puts the dispute where it belongs; between the children involved. This will eliminate attention getting behaviors that can monopolize a teacher's time. The Peace Rose also eliminates a need for the teacher to decide who was right or wrong in a given dispute. When teachers are forced to make these decisions they are forced to make decisions that do not assist the children in learning process. The children do not benefit unless they are actively involved in the problem solving and decision making.

By using the Peace Rose Method of problem solving in their classrooms the teachers can be assured that they are not only helping in developing a peaceful and 'learning friendly' environment, but they are also teaching young children valuable skills that they will use for the rest of their lives.