



How Do I Know If My Child Is Learning?

By Laura Flores Shaw on Apr 11, 2017

This white paper is from [volume 1](#). Other white papers in this volume include:

- [Education For The 21st Century Economy](#)
- [Montessori And Creativity](#)
- [Montessori And The Development Of Executive Functions](#)
- [Concentration - The Key To Building A Better Brain](#)

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Discipline in freedom seemed to solve a problem which had hitherto seemed insoluble. The answer lay in obtaining discipline by giving freedom. These children, who sought their work in freedom, each absorbed in a different kind of task, yet all belonging to the same group, gave an impression of perfect discipline.

Maria Montessori

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HOW DO I KNOW IF MY CHILD IS LEARNING?

For parents, enrolling one's child in a Montessori school can feel like an act of faith. Montessori's holistic approach is completely different from conventional education's test-focused, factory-model approach. And now much of the current US education reform conversation centers on using assessments to not only evaluate student learning but also teacher effectiveness. This endless stream of media test-talk can generate anxiety and doubt for Montessori parents whose children may have limited, if any, exposure to testing or even formal grades. Despite seeing how well their children are developing within their Montessori classrooms, that anxiety and doubt can lead parents to wonder, "How do I know if my child is learning?"

One of the main reasons most Montessori schools do not test or grade their preschool or elementary students is because the method's central aim is to produce contributing members of society, not good test takers. So rather than focusing on test preparation, whether it be in-class or standardized tests, Montessori teachers focus on guiding students towards becoming self-regulated in their learning – a process Montessori refers to as *normalization*.

Students who are self-regulated in their learning know how to take charge of their learning process, which makes them adaptable. And since we have no idea what sort of economy our children will enter when grown, adaptability is even more crucial now than ever before (see *Education for the 21st Century Economy*, this volume). As economist Anirban Basu stated, "The most important thing students need to learn in school is how to learn." Students who are self-regulated in their learning know just how to do that.

Self-regulated learners are, as researcher Barry Zimmerman states, "...masters of their own learning process," able to "transform their mental abilities into task-related skills in diverse areas of functioning, such as academia, sport, music, and health" (which basically means they can learn anything). Dr. Montessori understood well over 100 years ago that mastery over one's own learning process was important to even young children. Conventional education researchers, however, didn't figure that out until the mid-80's. Since then, they've been collecting empirical evidence about the effects of self-regulated learning on student achievement. And what they've found is that self-regulated learners achieve – but not just sometimes, consistently.

The reason self-regulated learners can learn anything and consistently achieve is because they use effective learning strategies. They set goals, plan, organize and transform information, seek and select information, keep and monitor records (for Montessori elementary students these may include notes and work record journals), structure their learning environment so they can learn, self-impose positive and negative consequences, use rehearsal and other memorization strategies (gotta learn those math facts!), seek social assistance, self-evaluate, and review records. Essentially, what all this planning and organizing shows is that self-regulated learners have really good executive functions – cognitive abilities required for goal-directed behaviors. And research demonstrates that Montessori education promotes these abilities (see *Montessori and the Development of Executive Functions*, this volume).

Researchers have found that high-achieving students use a greater variety of learning strategies more frequently than low-achieving students. But they have also found that just by observing the variety and frequency of learning strategies that students use, they can accurately place students in either a high or low-achieving category, as determined by standardized test scores. Even in young children, self-regulated learning behaviors can predict academic abilities at age five. This means that the evidence points to a bi-directional relationship between self-regulated learning and

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achievement: high academic achievement predicts greater use of self-regulated learning behaviors and greater use of self-learning behaviors predicts high academic achievement.

So what does this mean in a Montessori context?

For one, Montessori teachers are trained to **systematically – not just casually – observe** their students' behaviors. On some days, you will find a teacher sitting in a chair, notebook in hand, observing the children as they work. The teacher is likely to also train her assistant to observe and look for certain behaviors on days when the teacher is giving presentations or lessons. Such observations are what researchers call formative assessment.¹² A teacher can use any information gleaned from formative assessment to alter her teaching or the student's learning, which may include guiding them towards more effective self-regulated learning strategies.¹³ So unlike conventional environments where it is expected that teachers are giving lessons all the time, Montessori teachers are taking time to assess the children's self-regulated learning behaviors, which is exactly what researchers recommend.¹⁴

At the elementary level, in addition to observing, teachers may also have weekly one-on-one meetings with their students. For instance, at Oak Knoll Kinderhaus Montessori in Altadena, California, no lessons are given on Mondays. Instead, teachers meet with their students one-on-one to go over their completed and incomplete work (and when the children are not in their meeting, they are, of course working!). The students also bring their work record journals to the meeting (which are also checked daily). With some guidance from the teacher – not directives – the student determines whether he is on track with his learning or if he needs to make some adjustments for the week. These meetings also give the student time to express concerns, issues, or ask questions (though there are always opportunities throughout the week to ask questions). This is another type of formative assessment that gives the teacher diagnostic information about the needs of each student and his or her self-regulated learning behaviors.

While Montessori teachers are not grading students or giving them tests to determine whether or not they are learning, they are constantly assessing them. So when your child's Montessori teacher says that your child is normalized, she is telling you that your child is a self-regulated learner. That means your child is not only learning, he is also achieving.

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