

Follow the Child: How Junior Great Books Aligns with Montessori Methods

Montessori education has long been known and celebrated for employing inquiry-based learning. Junior Great Books® and the Shared Inquiry™ method of learning align perfectly with Montessori's goals and practices. At its core, Montessori education recognizes that children are naturally curious and possess an innate desire to explore and make sense of the world around them. In the Montessori classroom, learning is not limited to transmitting information from teacher to student. Instead, it is a dynamic process that encourages active engagement and self-discovery.

Inquiry-Based Learning

Inquiry-based learning lies at the heart of the Montessori approach. Students are encouraged to ask questions, seek answers, and explore topics that pique their interest. Rather than relying solely on textbooks and lectures, Montessori classrooms provide rich, hands-on materials and learning opportunities that enable students to delve deeply into subjects and acquire knowledge through firsthand experiences. This approach cultivates critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, and a lifelong love for learning.

Junior Great Books and Inquiry-Based Learning

Junior Great Books embodies the principles of inquiry-based learning cherished in Montessori education. Through carefully curated literature, Shared Inquiry invites students to engage in meaningful discussions, pose questions, and explore the underlying themes and ideas within literary works. The Junior Great Books program stimulates curiosity and active participation in the learning process by encouraging students to think critically, analyze texts, and draw connections between their own experiences and the stories they encounter.

Multiage and Multiability Groupings

Students in the Montessori classroom work collaboratively in multiage groupings. Junior Great Books supports students of all abilities in Shared Inquiry. Multiage groupings of students, using Junior Great Books, can work independently and with the guidance of a leader to solve questions of meaning about texts and other objects of inquiry. As students grow in their ability to engage in inquiry-based learning, they can also take on leadership roles in the process.

Below we have matched the standards from the American Montessori Society to the possibilities available in Junior Great Books.

Junior Great Books® is a registered trademark of the Great Books Foundation.
Shared Inquiry™ is a trademark of the Great Books Foundation.

Junior Great Books and Montessori Practices

Montessori Practices*	Junior Great Books
Creates and continues to foster a program, culture, and inclusive community of students, families, faculty and staff, and governing body (if applicable), that embraces diverse perspectives, cultures, backgrounds, and identities.	Junior Great Books materials and professional development equips educators to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a culture of collaboration, listening, and mutual respect by using Shared Inquiry guidelines and etiquette recommendations. • Facilitate conversations about texts written by and depicting people with different experiences, abilities, and goals.
Promotes a culture of participation, responsibility, and ownership.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share their reactions to issues and texts (prereading, sharing questions, Shared Inquiry discussion). • Articulate their interest in specific questions for discussion. • Develop and practice self-management and collaborative skills. • Pursue their own interests and/or express themselves creatively through a range of extension activities.
Institutes, publishes, and facilitates systems that promote consistency and continuity of the curriculum within and across program levels.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All units contain outlines and options for activities that provide consistency from text-to-text and group-to-group.
Ensures oversight of curricular and extracurricular activities that are sponsored/offered by the school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Briefings and awareness sessions can be provided for all staff. • Tools are available for using Junior Great Books as an extracurricular activity.
Allows for a variety of activities such as individual/group, floor/table, noisy/quiet, and active/sedentary.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each unit provides activity options that include many modalities for learning. • Each unit provides multiple ways to participate and share responses in activities (e.g., text-to-self connections or interpretive activities).
School administrators and educators shall ensure that students with disabilities are educated with their non-disabled peers to the greatest extent appropriate, utilizing push-in supports and programs wherever appropriate. Students with disabilities shall be removed from the regular classroom setting for the provision of instruction and/or services only when necessary and individually appropriate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Junior Great Books activities are well suited for differentiation and inclusion.

Montessori Practices	Junior Great Books
<p>The learning environment is student-centered and self-directed. It promotes the development of order, coordination, concentration, and independence. Indicators of successful implementation include students engaging in self-directed learning and completing cycles of work independently.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students can be self-directed in their learning, using the materials and working collaboratively. • Offers multiple opportunities and ways for students to express and develop their ideas. • Includes activity options that make critical thinking about challenging texts accessible to all students. • Offers space for students to reflect, expand, and change answers. • Supports students' development of skills for constructively responding to other students' ideas. • Modeling the leader's role at the beginning allows students to step into the role in subsequent sessions.
<p>The learning environment is student-centered and designed to promote the development of organizational and time management skills, conflict resolution skills, concentration, independence, cooperation, and collaboration. Indicators of successful implementation include teacher guidance, assessment in planning in concert with student planning, monitoring, and assessing their own work, and demonstrating responsibility for their own learning and actions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses an inquiry-centered curriculum and proven instructional practices to challenge all students. • Differentiates activities to meet the needs of a wide variety of learners. • Creates project-based and research opportunities for students to investigate their areas of interest. • Creates a learning environment that encourages students to collaborate by offering initial ideas, elaborating on them, and modifying them as needed.
<p>The curriculum prepares students for post-secondary education or careers through self-construction, extensive self-reflection, and opportunities for leadership and personal responsibility.</p> <p>Personality integration and stewardship of the earth and humanity are crucial elements of the curriculum. Students' independent decision-making, problem solving, community building, and application of learning indicate successful implementation of the curriculum.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each unit culminates with metacognitive reflections and opportunities to reflect on the learning process. • Each unit uses a range of inquiry-centered activities to help students work independently and collaboratively to develop and refine their responses to the ideas in a text. • Selections include many opportunities to encounter ideas that inspire students to ask big questions. • Each unit helps students extend the Shared Inquiry emphasis on weighing evidence to real-world decision-making.

Montessori Practices	Junior Great Books
The school provides uninterrupted work periods of a length appropriate to the age of students served, to support student learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students' interests and curiosity can determine the length of time for each activity.
Elementary: The school allocates and protects, at minimum, a 2-hour work cycle, 4 days per week. A 3-hour uninterrupted work cycle, 5 days per week is optimal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students' interests and curiosity can determine the length of time for each activity.
Secondary: The school allocates and protects, at minimum, a 90-minute work cycle for core curricular subjects (math, English, history or humanities, sciences, and additional world language/s).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students' interests and curiosity can determine the length of time for each activity.
<p>The Montessori teacher is . . .</p> <p>One who demonstrates knowledge and internalization of the core beliefs of Montessori philosophy, such as respect for the individual learner; preparation of self and the environment; fostering independence, order and concentration in the student; respect for and recognition of sensitive periods, planes of development, intrinsic motivation of the student, and the absorbent mind.</p>	<p>A Shared Inquiry leader:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Models genuine curiosity Supports student discovery Encourages students to develop their ideas Requires evidence for ideas Seeks to encourage collaborations
<p>The Montessori teacher . . .</p> <p>Designs and uses instructional strategies, innovations, and activities that are observation- and research-based, meet student needs, and reflect Montessori best practice.</p> <p>Promotes active involvement of students in the learning process.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In a carefully designed meta-analysis of nine discussion-based methods, Shared Inquiry was one of only three approaches that increased literal or basic comprehension and high-level comprehension (i.e., critical thinking and reasoning about or around text) (Murphy et al. 2009). Several key aspects of Shared Inquiry have proven essential for productive discussion including structure, focus, high ratio of student-to-teacher talk, open-ended questions, and high degree of uptake (questions that follow from a previous statement) (Murphy et al. 2009). Uses a range of inquiry-centered activities to help students work independently and collaboratively to develop and refine their responses to the ideas in a text.

Montessori Practices	Junior Great Books
<p>The Montessori teacher . . .</p> <p>Provides for a balance of uninterrupted, self-directed, self-teaching, and collaborative activities with the presentation of individual, small-, and large-group lessons.</p> <p>Implements and keeps clear, written records of individual, small-, and large-group lessons and activities and uses a comprehensive record keeping system that accurately reflects each student’s development.</p> <p>Recognizes and provides opportunities for students to participate in meaningful, age-appropriate leadership activities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses a range of inquiry-centered activities to help students work independently and collaboratively to develop and refine their responses to the ideas in a text. • Leaders who employ the seating chart tool have a clear record of discussions and can utilize data to track development and encourage growth. • Uses Shared Inquiry activities and follow-up questions to build students’ social and emotional skills, including self-management and healthy relationship practices. • Uses student reflection tools to help students monitor their progress and set learning and social and emotional goals. • Creates peer-to-peer opportunities for students to work constructively together on interpretive projects.
<p>In a quality Montessori school, the administrative leader, faculty, and staff collaboratively . . .</p> <p>Create, publish, and implement a data-driven system including qualitative (rubric-based) and quantitative measures (as appropriate to the age level) to assess student progress toward the established learner outcomes.</p> <p>Provides family support and enrichment opportunities such as workshops on Montessori philosophy and curriculum, parenting issues, child development, and health and safety issues.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Junior Great Books provides student learning spectrum charts to measure incremental growth throughout units and rubrics that help leaders to determine the group’s current ability and where to go next. • Junior Great Books materials include materials for parents.

*Montessori practices come from the AMS standard.

Murphy, P. K., Wilkinson, I. A. G., Soter, A. O., Hennessey, M. N., & Alexander, J. F. (2009). “Examining the Effects of Classroom Discussion on Students’ Comprehension of Text: A Meta-Analysis.” *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 101(3), 740–764. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015576>