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The Latest Fad in Alternative Education: Montessori Methodology

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When one reads the papers these days, the newest ‘catch’ word in alternative education is ‘Montessori.’ The success of the Montessori method is lauded on every page. It is the latest method used to educate children, and it appears to be working with amazing success, but is this really the case? Furthermore, is this methodology applicable beyond primary the grades?

This ‘new education movement’ has actually been present in the United States since 1912 when Alexander Graham Bell, fascinated with the methodology of a young Italian doctor, Maria Montessori, invited her to Washington to give lectures to the public and train teachers in her methodology. Doctor Montessori’s theories flourished in America for about a decade and then lay dormant until the 1950’s. It was at this time when Nancy Rambusch, “a mother frustrated by the lack of choices for her children’s education,” went to Europe to train in Montessori methods (Shute 2002). Rambusch’s efforts over the years have popularized Montessori teaching methods such that there are approximately 5,000 Montessori schools in operation today (Shute 2002).

So, these theories are not the newest fad to come along, but from where did they originate? To answer this question, one needs to go back to Italy in 1891, when a young Maria Montessori persistently applied to the University of Rome’s medical school. She was repeatedly refused, but this only caused her to redouble her efforts for application and writing letters of protest to anyone of consequence in Italy, even the Pope. Eventually, she was admitted and four years later in 1895, she became the first female doctor in Italy (Parkyn 2004). She said of herself at that time, “I am not famous because of my skill or my intelligence, but for my courage and indifference” (Shute 2002).

Although Montessori was very intelligent, she was often sidelined and experienced open hostility for being the first to forcibly break with medical tradition in Italy. Consequently, she was assigned to work in the children’s wing of hospitals as many people thought it improper for a woman to view naked, adult bodies (Parkyn 2004). This led her to work amongst and study mentally disabled

children. “She was appalled that they were given nothing to stimulate their minds – no toys, no puzzles, no pencils or paper – instead being left to wallow in the filthy conditions surrounding them” (Parkyn 2004). Thus, she began to read the ideas of Jean-Marc Gaspard Itard and Edouard Seguin. They both felt that “backwards children needed special education rather than medical treatment” (Parkyn 2004).

From here, she thought back to her negative experiences in school and visited many schools, and concluded that students were “like butterflies mounted on pins, fastened each to his place, the desk, spreading the useless wings of barren and meaningless knowledge which they have acquired” (Shute 2002). With this philosophy in mind, she agreed to run a class for street children in the San Lorenzo slums in Rome and saw this as the perfect opportunity to experiment with her ideas in teaching children. After some time, her “wild and unruly” children settled and began to teach themselves to read and write, even at the preschool age. They were also exposed to and absorbed “far more than reading and writing...it was botany, zoology, mathematics, geography, and all with the same ease, spontaneously, and without getting tired” (Flaherty 2005).

Montessori’s curriculum was highly radical for her day, and even today, some aspects of it are still considered unconventional. Montessori thought that the learning environment was equal in importance to the learning itself, and this manifested itself in classrooms designed for the height and size of a small person. The miniature chairs, tables, low sinks and counters of kindergarten rooms have their origins with Maria Montessori. She felt that these sorts of environments allowed children to feel safe as well as gain a sense of self-accomplishment because they could manipulate objects in their classrooms. Another important factor in teaching for Montessori was the way she treated children. She always gave them the same respect she would offer an adult. This was very radical in her day as

“society felt that children should be seen and not heard” (Flaherty 2005). This too was a way to empower children to self-confidence.

The basis for these methods and her entire curriculum was to further “the self-creating process of the child” (American Montessori Society 2005). Her premise here was that children will teach themselves given a stimulating environment. “In order for self directed learning to take place, the whole learning environment – classroom, materials and social setting/atmosphere – must be supportive of the child” (Montessori Connections 2005). A classroom should be stocked with “multi-sensory, sequential, and self correcting materials to facilitate learning” (Montessori Connections 2005) and thus the child makes the selection of what, when and how long to work with a given set of materials. Montessori sought to first educate the senses and then the intellect. “She sought to teach skills not by having children repeatedly try it, but by developing exercises that prepare them. These exercises would then be repeated: looking becomes reading; touching becomes writing” (Smith 2005).

This tactic in teaching was and is still often criticized because some children do not want to self-initiate a learning activity, but Montessori proponents claim that patience is needed for some students in some situations until they are ready to initiate the activity. These students may not be developmentally ready to self-initiate and should not be forced before they are ready. Montessori experts claim that most reluctant students, however, will enter into activities by being absorbed by the ‘participating’ culture of the older children in the classroom (Seldin & Epstein 2005).

In Montessori’s day as well as in present day Montessori schools, classes are large because the emphasis is placed on learning from other students rather than the teacher and thus the more children present, the more opportunities a child will have to interact with many ‘young teachers.’ Furthermore, classes consist of children of different ages, usually “usually encompassing a two- or three-year span, which allows younger students the stimulation of older children, who in turn benefit from serving as

role models.” Also, “with two-thirds of the class normally returning each year, the classroom culture tends to remain quite stable” (Seldin & Epstein 2005).

The Montessori classroom is not the domain of the adults in charge; it is, instead a carefully prepared environment designed to facilitate the development of the children’s independence and sense of personal empowerment. This is a children’s community. They move freely within it, selecting work that captures their interest. In a very real sense, even very small children are responsible for the care of their own child-sized environment. When they are hungry, they prepare their own snacks and drinks. They go to the bathroom without assistance. When something spills, they help each other carefully clean up (Seldin & Epstein 2005).

This program has proven itself effective with children at the primary school level in the face of criticisms that it is elitist and too rigid. Some critics also fault Montessori schools with an “obsession with the ‘correct’ use of blocks and beads, the lack of emphasis on fantasy and creativity,” but in the same breath, they also cite that these criticisms “don’t compromise the value of the program. The strategies the teachers use are very clear. Children seem to respond well” (Shute 2002). While there can be said some agreement amongst educators about the value of these practices, there really is not any extensive research as to the superiority of the Montessori methodology.

Because of this, the Association Montessori International funded The National Center on Education Restructuring and Inclusion to conduct a study of the academic performance of students in ‘mainstream’ high school who had attended Montessori elementary schools versus students from the same school who had not. The students who had attended Montessori elementary schools “significantly outperformed” their classmates in only math and science. In social studies, english and overall GPA, there was no significance difference between the two groups. The conclusions of this study “supports the hypothesis that Montessori education has a positive long-term impact.

Additionally, it provides an affirmative answer to the question about whether Montessori students will be successful in traditional schools” (Dohrmann 2003).

Finally, there is the matter of Montessori schools on the secondary level. As children graduate from the primary schools, their parents want secondary schools that continue with the Montessori philosophy. In Montessori’s time, the primary focus of public education was for elementary school children. Simply getting children to read and write was enough in those days, and thus most of Montessori’s particulars in methodology only apply to educating small children. However, it has been found that Montessori’s methods are applicable beyond the elementary venue.

The first public Montessori high school was opened in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1997. Although it has not been open many years to gauge the breadth of its impact on students, it is making impressive accomplishments. It is the only school in its district of 39,000 students not labeled an “academic emergency” by the state. Furthermore, it is rated by the state as “excellent,” the top of five possible ratings for schools in Ohio. Finally, it has a 100% graduation rate and the 44 seniors graduating in 2004 “amassed more than \$1.5 million in scholarships” (Mrozowski 2004). Others have opened since this one, but as they are even more recent developments, there is not enough data yet to make a comprehensive study as to the effectiveness of Montessori high schools versus mainstream high schools.

In conclusion, the Montessori methodology has a strong base of supporters. Students appreciate the freedom and security a Montessori classroom provides for them. Parents approve of Montessori schools by their overwhelming efforts to get Montessori programs started in their communities. Finally, researchers are tentatively confirming the value of these schools at the elementary levels in that they prepare students for the rigors of high school, but more research is needed especially in the effectiveness of the application of these methods at a secondary level.

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