



Why Montessori? A Parent's View

By Judy Bentley

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As a former high school and current college English teacher, I have become increasingly dismayed by a sense of lethargy among students I meet in the classroom. In general, they lack enthusiasm, initiative, a questioning attitude, or a sense of responsibility for their work. They seem always to be waiting for "something" to happen. Even if they have work in progress, they do not begin until the teacher enters the room and tells them to start. If the teacher leaves the room, all work usually stops; and should a substitute teacher be required, nothing much is accomplished that day.

The problem, I have concluded, is that our current educational system, whether public or private, secular or religious, has made students teacher-dependent. They feel that education is not something that they undertake, but something that is done to them. This idea was represented in its extremity a few years ago in a California lawsuit. A graduate of a public school system sued the system and his teachers because he had graduated from high school without learning to read, write or calculate. He reasoned that if he did not learn, it was because the teachers did not teach and were therefore liable for his failures. What happened to the two-year-old, I wondered, who fights to "do it myself," who is enthusiastic about mastering new tasks and proud of his accomplishments, who is "self-educated"?

Sadly, he has probably become the lethargic individual I encounter in high school and college classrooms. Such is not the case with students educated in the Montessori system, however. In New World's elementary classrooms, students check in with the teachers and begin work independently. The teachers may enter and leave the room without the students even noticing, much less interrupting their work. If a teacher is absent, work continues pretty much as usual -- all because Montessori students are not teacher-dependent. The teacher's role is to monitor progress, give help when needed, and to present a method or process for mastery in a given field of study. Education, however, remains the student's responsibility. As a result, an elementary Montessori education fosters initiative, independence, enthusiasm, and self-esteem, while the structure of traditional classrooms encourages passivity and the resulting boredom and loss of a sense of accomplishment.

The widespread use of textbooks also contributes to this general malaise. Textbooks take all the fun out of learning. The excitement comes not in memorizing what someone else discovered, but in the process of discovery itself, in asking the important questions, doing the research, evaluating the information, and organizing it for presentation to someone else. The author of the textbook gets to develop all these critical thinking skills, while the traditional student gets only to develop his memory -- one of the lower level thinking skills. Is it any surprise, then, that his memory lasts only until the next test, and that he is not very good at what has come to be called critical thinking -- that he can't compare, contrast, judge, synthesize or create?

Critical thinking can't be taught as a subject but is an intrinsic part of the educational process. In order to think critically, the students must be presented with a variety of alternatives. This is exactly what happens in the research-based Montessori curriculum. Critical thinking occurs naturally because there is no one authoritative source. An example occurred last year when my nine-year-old son and a friend were researching the fastest airplane on record. Both went to books on aviation, but each came away with a



different answer. This naturally led to a discussion of the validity of the sources and how to evaluate their worth. The emphasis in Montessori is on the process -- on how one learns science or history or geography, not on memorizing a certain set of data.

A common objection to this methodology is that Montessori students have "holes" in their backgrounds. If by this the speaker means that Montessori students do not have the same assortment of facts at their command that a traditional student does, then he is right. But look at it another way. So vast is the array of possible knowledge to be studied that few traditional students share the same body of data. The rapid expansion of knowledge in fields such as science makes teaching everything virtually impossible, so some material is selected while other material is omitted. Traditional schools tend to emphasize the past over the future and the known over the questions still to be answered. They emphasize the "What?" "Where?" and "When?" while Montessori allows for the "Why?" "How?" "How do you know?" and "What if...?"

Montessori materials and teachers present the broad framework of each discipline and the method of learning within it. Montessori education also moves from the large to the small -- from the cosmos to the natural world to humans' place within it. Each "piece" of knowledge the student acquires has a place to fit in that general framework. All too often in traditional education, knowledge consists of unrelated pieces of information. The student studies the history of Wisconsin, for example, but without knowledge of its place in the universe, both literally and figuratively. In contrast, in the Montessori curriculum, math and writing are not exercises in a textbook but tools for discovery, recording and reporting. The students "know" the materials at a much deeper level when they have made it their own in speech and writing.

My fifty-four-year-old brother-in-law likes to say that he got his real education on the playground of first grade, and we all know what that means. While all schools aim to develop children's social skills, opportunities for students to work together without the teacher are rare, except on the infamous playground. At New World Montessori School, however, social skills are part of the curriculum. Students work in small groups from the age of five, and classes meet regularly to define rules, solve problems and make plans.

Let me give you an example. When my oldest son attended a traditional first grade, the children were guests at their own Christmas party. Well-meaning mothers chose the games, assembled the equipment, cooked and served the food, while the children merely followed instructions from another set of adults. In contrast, for last year's Thanksgiving party at New World, students formed committees to plan the activity (a candlelight luncheon to which parents were invited), draw up a budget, and allocate responsibilities. Everything from the menu to the table settings to the entertainment to the coat check operation was the full responsibility of the children. Imagine how much more they learned about social interaction than did my son's other class. Traditional schools teach children how to deal with someone in authority by meeting his or her demands, a necessary skill in a monarchy or the military. But if we want children to learn the role they must play in a democracy, then they must learn to accept responsibility, exercise leadership, negotiate, cooperate and compromise, not just on the playground, where might often makes right, but in the classroom as well.

In the final analysis, successful and happy people don't have special knowledge or even exceptional gifts beyond the rest. What they have is self-esteem, initiative, creativity and enthusiasm; they can figure out what they need to know and how to learn it; they take pleasure in hard work, they think critically, and they



live and work well with others. Montessori education doesn't just pay lip service to these qualities. It is the only school system that formally fosters their development. When you select an elementary school for your child, it is not enough to look at what is being taught; it is even more important to recognize how the character of the child is formed by the way that education is structured. Montessori education respects the child in a way no other system even attempts, and the effect is profound. One visit to the elementary classroom should convince you that the program at New World Montessori School is what education should be.