

Montessori education: principles, philosophy and practice



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The “ Montessori Method” developed initially at the first Casa dei Bambini that Montessori established in 1906 in San Lorenzo in Rome. As with modern Montessori education, the basic principles were straightforward. First, Montessori believed that children were innate knowledge seekers and that they taught themselves. As she expressed it, young learners were “ self-creating.” Second, Montessori believed that, at each stage of development, education should include and evolve within “ prepared environments, ” environments that enabled children to take on accountability for their own learning as they engaged the processes relevant to becoming able and actualized adults and citizens. More specifically, according to the American Montessori Society (AMS), Montessori’s pedagogy stressed the following critical and structuring notions:

- The aim of Montessori education is to foster competent, responsible, adaptive citizens who are lifelong learners and problem solvers;
- Learning occurs in an inquiring, cooperative, nurturing atmosphere. Students increase their own knowledge through both self- and teacher-initiated experiences;
- Learning takes place through the senses. Students learn by manipulating materials and interacting with others. These meaningful experiences are precursors to the abstract understanding of ideas;
- The individual is considered as a whole. The physical, emotional, social, aesthetic, spiritual, and cognitive needs and interests are inseparable and equally important; [and]

- Respect and caring attitudes for oneself, others, the environment, and all life are necessary. 5

Pedagogically, perhaps the most important, and most famous, emphases are Montessori's conceptualizations of the prepared environment and the developmental plane. According to the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI, founded by Montessori herself in 1929), the prepared environment of the Montessori classroom is one

where children are free to respond to their natural tendency to work [and where their] innate passion[s] for learning [are] encouraged by giving them opportunities to engage in spontaneous, purposeful activities with the guidance of a trained adult. [Here, and t]hrough their work, the children develop concentration and joyful self-discipline.] Within a framework of order, [they] progress at their own pace and rhythm, according to their individual capabilities. 6

These are environments that

allow [children] to take responsibility for their own education, giving them the opportunity to become human beings able to function independently and hence interdependently. 7

From this view, the prepared environment is one that “ can be designed to facilitate maximum independent learning and exploration by the child, ” one in which “ there is a variety of activity as well as a great deal of movement.” In this situation, according to the Montessori approach, this “ necessary preparedness” enables “ children [to] work on activities of their own choice

at their own pace.” Further, “[t]hey [children] experience a blend of freedom and self-discipline in a place especially designed to meet their developmental needs.” 8

The notion of prepared environment is related, moreover, to the manipulation of learning materials and to the understanding of “normalization.”

From the Montessorian view, materials are to be accessible (e. g., placed on appropriately high or low shelves) and available for individual student choice, interest, and use. They are, to a large extent, fully the responsibility of students-regardless of age (e. g., students obtain, return, and maintain them). More pedagogically precise, these materials aim at inducing activity, isolating a particular learning quality (e. g., comparison and contrast, size, color, shape, etc.), and inducing self-correctivity (i. e., students can perceive errors relative to their learning via the materials and correct them without [or with minimal] adult intervention) and interrelationality (i. e., that the various materials [should] build one upon the others). 9 Normalization, for Montessori, meant not its typical (or “normal”) definition of conformity and what “is normal” but, instead, a developmental process, one inextricably tied to the appropriate preparation of the pedagogical environment.

Montessori observed that children do best in schools (and education more broadly) given maximal freedom in an environment designed to meet their unique growth and personal and social needs. Through continued work with materials that held their interest, selected independently from within the prepared environment, Montessori noted that children eventually acquired an increased sense of satisfaction, self, and inner fulfillment. The course <https://assignbuster.com/montessori-education-principles-philosophy-and-practice/>

through which this evolution occurred defined for her the nature and significance of normalization. As she wrote in *The Absorbent Mind*:

Only “normalized” children, aided by their environment, show in their subsequent development those wonderful powers that we describe: spontaneous discipline, continuous and happy work, social sentiments of help and sympathy for others ... An interesting piece of work, freely chosen, which has the virtue of inducing concentration rather than fatigue, adds to the child’s energies and mental capacities, and leads him [or her] to self-mastery ... One is tempted to say that the children are performing spiritual exercises, having found the path of self-perfectionment and of ascent to the inner heights of the soul. 10

As E. M. Standing, in *Maria Montessori: Her Life and Work*, defined the characteristics of normalization, they are:

- Love of order
- Love of work
- Spontaneous concentration
- Attachment to reality
- Love of silence and of working alone
- Sublimation of the possessive instinct
- [The p]ower to act from real choice

- Obedience
- Independence and initiative
- Spontaneous self-discipline
- Joy

As the North American Montessori Teachers' Association (NAMTA) says, "Montessori believed that these are the truly 'normal' characteristics of childhood, which emerge when children's developmental needs are met." 11 The idea of developmental plane designates the transitions that occur during the birth through adulthood evolution of human beings. According to AMI, the specific planes are:

- Birth to age six: children are sensorial explorers, constructing their intellects by absorbing every aspect of their environment, their language[,] and their culture;
- Age six to age twelve: children become conceptual explorers[; they] develop their powers of abstraction and imagination, and apply their knowledge to discover and expand their worlds further;
- Age twelve to age eighteen: children become humanistic explorers, seeking to understand their place in society and their opportunity to contribute to it;
- Age eighteen to age twenty-four: as young adults, [individuals] become specialized explorers, seeking a niche from which to contribute to universal dialogue. 12

More specifically, Montessori classrooms are divided into three-year groups, the purpose of which, according to Montessori's theories and observations, is to facilitate precisely and appropriately the continuum of growth and learning via human interaction and personal development and exploration, here both in terms of the individual and the social. 13 The multi-age divisions of the Montessori program are (1) parent-infant (ages 0-3), preschool (ages 3-6), lower and upper elementary (ages 6-9 and 9-12), and middle school (ages 12-14). Again, each presents its own precise purposes, materials, and activities and methodologies. 14 And yet Montessorian curriculum and instruction can be both complex and multiple, formal as well as unpredictable and less than rigid. Consider the following applied example. At the elementary level, the expectations of the learner and the appropriate pedagogical principles include:

1. Lesson repetition among students individually, that is after the initial presentation by the teacher, in order to concretize abstract concepts;
2. Cross-curriculum " webbing";
3. The view that ability is individual-adults and children work to the potential of each person, not to the average;
4. Ever-deepening interest on the part of the learner;
5. The perspective that respect, freedom, and responsibility are interdependent.

Our question, of course, is what these might mean in practice.

Lesson repetition implies recurrence and redundancy-not in a negative way but as individually developed experiences in an effort to habitualize, routinize, and conceptualize key (especially unfamiliar) ideas, such as, perhaps, counting and various other mathematical notions. Webbing suggests that each new idea leads to-and connects with-others, whether presented earlier or presented later. The individual nature of ability, as opposed to the “ average level of students, ” indicates focusing on children moving forward according to their own singular lesson paces without unwarranted stigmatizations and without undue pressure to “ track.” The idea of ever-increasing interest insinuates learners follow their own natural curiosities and inclinations (a la Kilpatrick?), particularly vis-à-vis engaging the essential question of “ why?” Lastly, regarding the case of the interconnectedness of ideas, such as respect, freedom, and responsibility, Montessori understandings suggest a relationship among values, culture, growth, success, and maturity, settings important, ultimately, to both liberal and conservative critics of contemporary American public schooling.

DEFENDING PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND MONTESSORI EDUCATION

According to NAMTA, well over 200 U. S. public schools are now Montessori-oriented, a number that continues to grow. 15 When viewed within the context of other contemporary public (though, granted, sometimes private as well) school reform trends (e. g., Waldorf education, charter schools, vouchers, public school choice), the commitment to Montessori public education seems to support at least two significant points. First, it represents, to some extent, the present dissatisfaction with “ traditional”

public schooling (or at least dominant images of it). Second, it supports the notion that another way—Montessori, Waldorf, and so on—might provide and prove to be a better way (especially within the contexts of the No Child Left Behind Act and standards-based educational reform).

Fundamentally, Montessori education offers but one alternative to the criticisms leveled at public schools from critics both of the political and pedagogical left and the political and pedagogical right. The “standard” right-wing critique centers on the beliefs that schools today are failing because they (1) have standards that are too low, (2) replicate the “worthless” theories and perspectives of the “liberal educational establishment,” (3) maintain a monopoly, (4) focus on “self-esteem” (and the like) over content, (5) rely on “progressive methods” at the expense of “direct instruction,” (6) have privileged “cultural relativism” over “traditional values” and “character,” (7) have usurped the power and position of parents, and (8) misguidedly “throw more money” at schools even though this is neither (from this view) a solution to educational problems nor the answer to educational improvement. 16

The standard left-wing critique is that schools fail students because they (1) stifle freedom and creativity in favor of conformity and discipline, (2) are dominated by noneducators (e. g., corporations, politicians, managers, test companies), (3) are too centrally controlled, (4) focus too much on fact-based, standardized content, (5) are too traditional in terms of assessment and instructional methods, (6) hyperemphasize homogeneity at the expense of diversity and difference, (7) neglect neighborhoods and local communities, and (8) are underfunded. 17 Conceivably, of course, one could make a case

<https://assignbuster.com/montessori-education-principles-philosophy-and-practice/>

in favor of the truth or utility of either or both of these critiques (although, indeed, we are more sympathetic to contemporary left-based criticisms). And, most likely, Montessori educators and other interested stakeholders probably possess and espouse a range of viewpoints relative to the overall effectiveness of traditional public schooling. Yet, what the Montessori approach does is connect with the concerns many (though not necessarily most) parents have (rightly or wrongly) that, at least broadly speaking, American public schools are failing or at least not up to snuff. While our own position is that this is not inevitably the case, 18 even so, Montessori education provides one appropriate and legitimate response to dominant modes of public schooling that can be consistent with a multitude of philosophical, pedagogical, political, and sociocultural goals. In fact, arguably, Montessorianism takes seriously the apprehensions of the entire spectrum of educational criticism (relative to official schooling). It emphasizes, for example, freedom, mastery, diversity, scientific research and methodologies, formal curriculum, individuality, fairness, planning, and hard work (among others)-each of which to some extent can meet the demands of both conservatives and liberals (if not others). That is not to say, of course, that the Montessori system is perfect-obviously, it is not. Yet, it does favorably compare with many aspects of more established modes of public education. According to NAMTA, the quintessential (and implicitly negative) characteristics of contemporary public school classrooms are their propensities toward:

- Textbooks, pencil and paper, worksheets and dittos

- Working and learning without emphasis on social development

<https://assignbuster.com/montessori-education-principles-philosophy-and-practice/>

- Narrow, unit-driven curriculum
- Individual subjects
- Block time, period lessons
- Single-graded classrooms
- Students [who are] passive, quiet, in desks
- Students [who] fit [the] mold of [their] school[s]
- Students [who] leave for special help
- Product-focused report cards 19

Although, to some, this version of traditional education might seem to describe perfectly only the conservative agenda, increasingly it can be seen to characterize what we have previously called the liberal-conservative consensus and to indicate the current “ will-to-standardize” or the “ standardization imperative” of both the liberal and conservative “ race” to the “ middle of the road.” 20 In contrast, NAMTA characterizes the Montessori approach as favoring:

- Prepared kinesthetic materials with incorporated control of error [and] specially developed reference materials
- Working and learning matched to the social development of the child
- Unified, internationally developed curriculum

- Integrated subjects and learning based on developmental psychology
- Uninterrupted work cycles
- Multi-age classrooms
- [A setting in which students are] active [and] talking, with periods of spontaneous quiet [and] freedom to move
- [A setting in which] school[s] meet the needs of students
- [A setting in which special] help comes to students
- Process-focused assessment, skills checklists, [and] mastery benchmarks

21

In effect, Montessori education provides parents and students an alternative option within the standard frameworks of public schooling. For those (generally liberal) critics who believe that traditional public education stifles freedom, individuality, and creativity, Montessori instruction offers spontaneity, choice, and creative student-centeredness. For those (generally conservative) critics who believe that public education has been “dumbed down,” is “anti-knowledge,” and is too “touchy-feely,” Montessori instruction offers hard work, discipline (in the most positive sense), and an emphasis on fundamental skills.

CONCLUSIONS

Montessori education in the public schools raises a number of questions, yet it implies, as well, a number of productive and pedagogically sound principles and practices.

Some of the difficulties with the historical criticisms of the Montessori approach include such concerns as immutability versus evolution (i. e., the extent to which Montessori education changes or the extent to which it should or must change), “ truth” or “ universality” (i. e., the degree to which it implies a structure that can, or does, meet the needs of all individual students), and teacher education (i. e., the potential conflict between individual interpretation, creativity, and independence and individual teacher conformity and disciplinarity). At the extremes, these issues (rightly or wrongly, for good or bad) weigh heavily on the capacity of the Montessori approach to meet its educational agendas and its stated purposes.

On the other hand, Montessori education represents a little known alternative to more traditional modes of public schooling; most members of the citizenry have no idea that such a state of affairs even exists. When most people think of public schools-their own, their children’s-they think of a homogeneous setting of traditionalism or of progressivism-either way, the same setup for everyone. Yet Montessori education demonstrates the diversity-often little understood, even unknown-that characterizes contemporary teaching and learning. This is most often, we think, quite a good thing. In any event, it presents the condition of “ effective” methods regardless of one’s political or pedagogical orientation-that is, whether one is conservative, liberal, reactionary, or radical. There is more going on, that is, <https://assignbuster.com/montessori-education-principles-philosophy-and-practice/>

than most people perceive. And, most profoundly, the Montessori effort-the movement-is on the ascendancy.

In the end, with respect to public education, the Montessori philosophy and its attendant methodologies imply something new, ironically new given the long and successful history of Maria Montessori's efforts and influences. If nothing else, it remains, after all this time, an option worth exploring and taking seriously. It is a viewpoint that should be reconsidered, reckoned with, and continuously and rigorously pursued. It is, that is, not the same old thing.