

The Washington Post

Montessori, Now 100, Goes Mainstream

Once Considered Radical and Elitist, Method Creeping Into Public Schools

By Jay Mathews
Washington Post Staff Writer
Tuesday, January 2, 2007; B01

The kids who scampered about construction zones in the San Lorenzo slums of Rome gave the work crews fits. Then the builders heard some woman doctor was recruiting students for a new school. They begged her to enroll the troublemakers in the Casa dei Bambini.

Maria Montessori agreed. Her Children's House offered a few dozen young students freedom. They could sort blocks, measure with beads, play with wooden letters or explore another project of their choice. They roamed through classrooms rather than building sites.

The results of this experiment launched in January 1907 captivated the education world, inspiring a movement over the next century that has helped define child-centered education.

More than 5,000 Montessori schools are spread across the United States, at least 8,000 worldwide. Dozens have sprung up in the Washington region .

The American Montessori Society, based in New York, reported 7 percent membership growth in just the past year, and many of the schools are getting ready to celebrate the centennial of the Montessori beachhead.

Once considered a maverick experiment that appealed only to middle-class white families in the States, Montessori schools have become popular with some black professionals and are getting results in low-income public schools with the kind of children on which Montessori first tested her ideas.

The stubborn Italian physician and her contemporary, U.S. philosopher and psychologist John Dewey -- who believed that learning should be active -- are considered perhaps the most influential progressive thinkers in the modern history of education.

But Montessori has had the more tangible impact, with versions of her child-centered practices passed from preschool teacher to preschool teacher, some not even aware of the origins of what they are doing.

Nowadays, her advocacy of unstructured class time seems antithetical to today's structured classrooms, with their emphasis on standardized testing and meeting the mandates of the federal No Child Left Behind law.

"One test of the correctness of educational procedure is the happiness of the child," Montessori said. She also declared: "The greatest sign of success for a teacher . . . is to be able to say: 'The children are now working as if I did not exist.' "

The Montessori approach, often found in private preschools and primary grade schools that serve predominantly white, affluent students, is having long-term success in several local public schools that attract low-income students. Prince George's County has two public Montessori schools for students from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade, the Robert Goddard school in Seabrook and the John Hanson school in Oxon Hill.

Advertisement » Your Ad Here

Open Now



No Fees.

No Minimums.

No Changing Banks.



Member FDIC

Arlington County, one of the first places in the country to establish tax-supported Montessori schools, has 17 preschool Montessori classes in 10 elementary schools and a program at the Drew Model School that goes through fifth grade.

There are 250 to 300 public Montessori schools nationwide. American Montessori Society President Michael J. Dorer, an education professor at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minn., said creating more public schools would be the best way to break out of the upper-income niche that in some ways still limits the Montessori movement's growth.

Dorer said his college and several others train Montessori teachers, but there are not enough instructors with credentials to meet demand from the expanding number of Montessori schools. Some schools with the Montessori name don't have many, or any, Montessori-trained teachers. "Anyone can open a school and call it a Montessori school. There is no trademark on the name," Dorer said. "It's a real problem."

Maria Montessori, who lived from 1870 to 1952, was a pioneering doctor in Italy. She gained international notice when the severely learning-disabled students she worked with passed educational tests designed for non-disabled children.

In her 2005 book "Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius," University of Virginia psychologist Angeline Stoll Lillard described how Montessori viewed the learning-disabled. Such children were often locked up in bare rooms, Lillard wrote, their food thrown at them. Montessori saw "their grasping at crumbs of food on the floor as starvation not for food, but for stimulation," she wrote.

Montessori developed a system of learning for all students, disabled and otherwise, in large open classrooms with low shelves, with tables of different sizes that fit one to four children and with chairs sized for children of different ages. Montessori classes often group children in three levels: ages 3 to 6, 6 to 9, and 9 to 12. The older students help the younger.

Various materials, mostly made of wood, are set out in a typical classroom. Children choose what they want to do. A child may decide to focus on learning to tie his shoes rather than recognize letters -- while his mother grits her teeth. But eventually, according to the Montessori way, he will get around to the materials that help teach reading and math because all the activities are meant to be inviting. Children move around rather than sit still and watch the teacher.

And it is appealing to some African American professionals. The private Henson Valley Montessori School in Temple Hills has grown 50 percent over the past decade and plans to move to larger quarters in Upper Marlboro in the fall.

On a recent day at Henson Valley, children were putting together map puzzles, blowing seeds in the air to demonstrate plant dispersion and planning the construction of a space station. "They are learning how to learn," said Stephanie Carr, a federal government manager who has three children at the school. Despite the free-form nature of lessons, "they get very good test scores," Carr said. "My children are testing above grade level."

Pamela Hayes, an accountant in Fort Washington, has three children at the school. "There was a feeling that we were part of a family," she said. The school serves 260 students from preschool through eighth grade; tuition is \$9,190 through sixth grade and \$12,160 for seventh and eighth.

Classrooms in the one-story building are arranged like a series of living rooms connected by short halls. Hayes's 9-year-old daughter worked outside with other children on a model of an international space station built with plastic pipe joints and soda bottles.

Valaida L. Wise, head of the Henson Valley school, graduated from what is now the Nora School. The small, private secondary school in Silver Spring shares some of the Montessori emphasis on putting students rather than teachers in charge of learning. That's what theorists generally mean by progressive education. Wise calls Montessori "progressive education on steroids."

The key to the method, she said, "is the individualized attention that we give to each child. We look for the children's brilliance. Each child's brilliance is different."

Experts say some research shows that children of middle-class, college-educated parents generally do well no matter what elementary schools they attend. For many of these children, the Montessori method works, even if their parents prefer a more rigorous teaching style in high school to get kids ready for the SAT and Advanced Placement classes.

The psychologist Lillard was at first skeptical of Montessori's ideas when she started her research 20 years ago. But she found that a strong body of evidence in developmental psychology supports Montessori's major conclusions -- among them, that there is a close relationship between movement and cognition, that the best learning is active and that order is beneficial for children.

Montessori's only major idea unsupported by evidence was her view that pretend play was a waste of time, Lillard wrote.

Above all, Montessori was practical. She looked for what worked rather than what fit a theory. "If schooling were evidence-based," Lillard wrote, "I think all schools would look a lot more like Montessori schools."

© 2007 The Washington Post Company

Ads by Google

Arizona Cyber Schools

Help give your children the education they deserve with AZVA.
www.AZVA.org

Early Childhood Education

Get a BA Education Degree Online. Affordable & Accredited. Join Now!
www.WGU.edu

The Juliana Group, Inc.

Montessori Materials & Furniture made in Europe by Gonzagarredi
www.julianagroup.com