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Montessori Approach in Public Schools

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Montessori Education in Public Schools

In June 2020, amidst the COVID-19 crisis, Just Schools Fund, a non-profit organization supporting educational justice, held a seminar with all of the leading organizations in the field of education equity (Global education justice... 2020). The guest speakers agreed that traditional forms of education do not work for all students and that it was beneficial to focus on schools trying innovative approaches. The world needs schools that are progressive, inclusive, and fully supported by the community. These ideas echo an education revolutionary from a much earlier time, Dr. Maria Montessori. Dr. Montessori led an educational movement that pushed for children's development to be honored and nurtured. Now, Montessori Education is an inquiry-based, student-centered, and whole child-based philosophy with benefits that can and should be applied to public school classrooms in an accessible and inclusive manner.

Dr. Maria Montessori was an educator and physician from Italy. She believed that children have underappreciated potential and sought a new way of education where children serve as constructors of their learning. Dr. Montessori spoke of children's innate ability to take in knowledge from the outside world, comparing children's brains to sponges (Montessori 1949). Children want to learn, and will therefore be drawn to activities that enhance their developmental learning. Interestingly, Dr. Maria Montessori was a socialist. She believed that the education of children – from birth onwards – was a collective right that should not only be the nuclear family's responsibility. She thought that the child was the center of change and that responsible

global citizenship started from birth (Montessori 1949, p. 1-7). Needless to say, Dr. Maria Montessori was an educator far beyond her time. Many of the ideas she wrote about and practiced are still being taught in teacher training programs to this day, including child-centered education, inquiry-based learning, and whole-child instruction.

Montessori education's most known motto is "follow the child". It is evident in how Montessori classrooms put the students' needs, wants, and inclinations before that of the teacher. The teacher is seen as a guide rather than an authority figure. Therefore, Montessori classrooms are set up with a variety of "jobs" that students can choose from and use independently with minimal support. These jobs are purposefully placed on shelves at the child's level and organized in ways that are calm and inviting. Teachers will often perform individual or small group lessons on how to use the various jobs, but afterward, students are released to explore the job on their own (Montessori at Home). For example, a common job in Montessori preschools is sorting items like various coins or different colored beads. The teacher will show the student how to take the job off the shelf and how to put the objects into different piles, but after some instruction, the student will work with the sorting on their own. The next day, the child may choose to go back to the sorting job and work independently until they master it. Students are allowed choice in which jobs they choose to focus on and are usually not given time limits. The teacher may guide students to particular subjects of work, but will ultimately follow the child's interests and abilities.

Montessori classrooms have five sections that focus on different areas of development: sensorial, language, practical life, culture and science, and lastly mathematics. Montessori classrooms often have pre-selected activities that are specifically designed for development in one of these areas but others are created or individualized. Sandpaper letters are an example of a

pre-selected activity that all Montessori classrooms have. Students and teachers use the sandpaper letters to learn letter-sound correspondences and build phonemic awareness. Unique to Montessori, sounds are emphasized over letter-names, for example, “s” is referred to as “sss” not “es” (Montessori at Home). This is part of the language section of Montessori classrooms. On the flip side, an example of a created or individualized activity is helping to clean the guinea pig cage in the classroom. At Lakeshore Montessori, there was one student in particular who had difficulty finding interest in school but was drawn to the guinea pigs. Helping clean the guinea pig cage helped him with his focus and built his practical life skills. Montessori education places importance on structure and organization, trying to build a calm and supportive environment for children to learn.

One of the strengths of Montessori education is its ties to inquiry-based learning. Traditional schooling, especially in lower funded schools, leans on repetitive memorization or “drill and kill” methods combined with strict teacher authority. In contrast, inquiry-based learning puts the students in the front seat of their education with a self-investigative exploration approach (Harmsen and Lazonder, 2016). The article, “How People Learn: Bridging Research and Practice” explains three findings concerning inquiry-based learning. These findings indicate that students come into school with pre-existing misconceptions about how the world works. For knowledge to stay long-term, students need to engage with their misconceptions before learning the new information (Bransford, Donovan, and Pellegrino 2000). This means students need to explore their ideas, even if they are incorrect, and discover knowledge themselves. This article also explains the importance of metacognition, reflecting on one’s thinking, in inquiry-based learning. Inquiry-based learning stands against repetitive memorization or “drill and kill” methods and pushes for more hands-on approaches encouraged by Montessori education.

Another strength of Montessori education is the emphasis on whole child development including socioemotional learning. Montessori requires students to focus on one particular job for as long as they need. Montessori classrooms are minimalist, quiet, and calm, designed for the optimal learning environment. Montessori classrooms are also built for children; everything from decor to the sink is at the children's level (Montessori at Home). As stated above, Montessori classrooms have five subjects: sensorial, language, practical life, math, science, and culture, allowing for a balanced curriculum. This allows subjects often neglected in public school education, like sensorial, culture, and practical life work, to take the forefront. These subjects encourage mindfulness, causing researchers to classify Montessori education as a form of mindfulness education (Lillard 2011, p. 78-85). Mindfulness is a form of socio-emotional learning, which is essential for education in any classroom but especially for classrooms of BIPOC and low-income students experiencing the effects of racism and poverty.

Despite Maria Montessori's vision of education equity, most Montessori schools are private and only accessible to upper-class, mostly white families (Fleming 2019). However, there have been increasing efforts to include Montessori in diverse public schooling in the United States and internationally. One of the success stories of Montessori is in Puerto Rico with La Escuela Juan Ponce de León where Montessori education helped raise academic success and lower rates of drug use and violence. A quote from a Puerto Rican principle explains the vast benefits, "For children, in terms of their behavior, discipline, and social skills, they have learned to solve their problems themselves. It has been an incredible change since we adopted the Montessori philosophy" (Ortiz-Blanes 2018). In addition to the study done in Puerto Rico, there are several successful cases of Montessori public schools in the United States. One notable example is in rural Latta, South Carolina where a low-income public school was turned into a

Montessori School. This school hosts almost fifty percent students of color and 70 percent on free and reduced lunch. After making the transition to Montessori, there incredible increases in family engagement, student behavior, and test scores (Fleming 2019).

These schools serve as two of many examples of Montessori public schools making a positive impact on both BIPOC and low-income students. However, the possibility of more public schools transitioning to the Montessori approach not always possible. There are many roadblocks to turning traditional public schools into Montessori schools. Montessori schools require teachers to be certified with the American Montessori Institute, which usually requires up to a Master's degree in Montessori education. In some instances, schools fund all of their teachers to participate in Montessori training as part of the transition (Fleming 2019). This is of course not possible for all public schools or public-school teachers. Montessori schools are inherently structured differently than traditional public schools and require a lot of time and coordination to transition. In addition, transitions to alternative education approaches often take place in charter or magnet school programs. Magnet and charter schools historically have not served BIPOC or low-income students well, and in actuality, take funding away from neighborhood schools. Therefore, Montessori integration seems the most practical for creating more equitable schools.

There are many benefits to including Montessori techniques in the classroom. Schools currently hold many different school philosophies and ideologies that are integrated into schools currently, like the whole child approach, project-based education, STEM education, and arts education. Integrating Montessori makes it possible to reach the largest number of students, especially BIPOC and low-income students who often lack access to high-quality education. Integration also allows other beneficial approaches to education to be used alongside Montessori,

rather than limiting education to only one approach. Integrating Montessori into public education requires the professional development of teachers. This is especially difficult when public schools already require extensive education of at least a Bachelor's degree and teaching certification. This financial requirement limits the number of educators of color who get Montessori certificates. One article explained the lack of Montessori teacher training programs in Predominately Black Institutions, and explained the benefits of improving this access, stating that Montessori could help showcase the genius of Black children (Jor'dan 2018). Having educators of color who are trained in the Montessori approach is crucial to integrating Montessori equitably. The benefits to students of color who could receive Montessori education from teachers who look like them would be unimaginable.

In conclusion, Montessori education has great potential to build equity and inclusivity in public schools using an inquiry-based, student-centered, and whole child-based approach. When combined with other best practices, quality funding, and a diverse educator population, Montessori education could have a large impact on our society's children. Dr. Montessori may have lived over one hundred years ago, but her vision lives on in the hearts and minds of educators internationally. Using her educational insights, we can move towards a more equitable and peaceful world.

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