

Montessori Approach to Assessment and Reporting



eArticle

2010
Issue 1

Montessori My School

Visit: <http://montessori.org.au/myschool.htm>

With the launch of the My School website there is increased interest in how Montessori Schools compare with traditional schools and particularly how assessment and reporting is handled in Montessori settings. Following is a brief summary of the Montessori approach to assessment and reporting followed by the reflections of a Montessori child, now adult, on how Montessori education compares with traditional schooling and how it prepares children for life.

Montessori Approach to Assessment and Reporting

The Montessori approach to assessment and reporting derives from the nature of Montessori philosophy and pedagogy.

It is based on the belief that each child is a competent learner, born ready to learn from the people and the cultural and material environment around them. The Montessori approach facilitates targeted and personalised learning and development experiences for each child, the timing of individualised lessons determined by the detailed observations of each child by the teacher.

Children work in three year age cohorts, in specially prepared environments which contain materials specifically designed to foster the achievement of appropriate developmental milestones, and the sequential mastery of skills and concepts across the range of disciplines. The materials provide feedback to the child and teacher as to where the child is at any time on these developmental milestones and in mastery of skills and concepts. There is a strong emphasis on individual choice and individualised teaching, based on the understanding that children do not achieve those developmental goals, nor master those skills and concepts, in lockstep, but rather need to work at their own pace, benefiting from the opportunities the three year age range provides to learn from and to teach each other, to be inspired by others, and to value helping others.

Montessori education is specifically non-competitive, and eschews rewards and punishment in favour of encouraging the development in children of intrinsic motivation for learning. Activities are open-ended, encouraging exploration and creative thinking, and as such do not lend themselves to grading. Children take ownership of their own progress through their daily work journal, weekly individual conferences with their teacher, by requesting specific lessons as the need arises, and by maintaining portfolios of work completed. These materials, and detailed daily observations of each child by the teacher, form the basis of reporting to parents.

Such reporting is individualised, highly detailed, and focused on the strengths of the child as well as areas where further development is needed. Using an A to E scale or an equivalent 5 point scale is less useful, and certainly less detailed. Nor is comparative reporting, which ranks a student's achievement against the performance of other members of the class, compatible with either Montessori philosophy or practice. Not only is comparative reporting often misleading for parents, and a cause of unwarranted anxiety, it is discouraging for students who score "poorly", detrimental to both their self-esteem and their willingness to persist, as well as potentially negative for those who do "well" by encouraging the valuing of high scores over the inherent satisfaction of learning.

In Montessori multi-aged classrooms, all students are aware of each others' abilities and are comfortable with working at their own pace. The achievements of others are not seen as threatening, but rather as something to which to aspire. Children are able to see that it is normal for individuals to achieve mastery in certain areas at different times and in different ways. As a result, they are encouraged rather than discouraged, and ready to continue to tackle, rather than to avoid, learning challenges.

Moreover, comparative reporting is not achievable in practical terms in Montessori schools, given the three year age cohorts with which we work, and our often small class and school sizes. Comparing children for a particular year within that three year age range will, in most cases, be statistically insignificant as the numbers in each "year" are small (often less than 10) and children within each year are not all learning the same concepts at the same time.

Reflections on a Montessori Childhood

By Kristin McAlister-Young

When I was asked to write a bit about my experiences growing up in a Montessori school, I initially thought it would be so easy... a quick essay about my schooling. I went to a Montessori school from age 3 to age 12 so I have quite a bit of material to work with. But as I sit to write, I realise what a strange thing it is to be asked to reflect on one's own education. I'm just not quite sure where my schooling ends and where I, as an individual, begin. What is me and the way I approach the world and what is a result of a Montessori upbringing? Would I have been as independent, as curious about life, as passionate about the interconnectedness of the world and its inhabitants if I had not been raised with the Montessori philosophy? I'm not sure. I'd like to think a little of it is just inherent in me, but even so, I question what would have happened to that innate curiosity had I spent my elementary years in a traditional school.

There are many books you can read which will give you an idea of what a Montessori elementary classroom is like. I will not repeat that here, because you would get a more accurate account by reading those books or by talking to children currently in the schools. Rather, I'd like to share my impressions of the Montessori experience as an adult looking back on how it shaped me. What made me most conscious of the wonderful education I had received from my Montessori schooling was when I changed to a traditional school at age twelve. The juxtaposition of the two schools made me aware of the independence, internal discipline, love of learning and critical mind that Montessori had created in me, and it might help the reader understand as well.

This perspective might also be useful to parents in another way since I am often asked by prospective elementary parents if Montessori children will have a hard adjustment when they move to a traditional school. I know parents want to hear that the adjustment is easy. I know that the ability to successfully make that adjustment is taken as reassurance that their children will benefit from the nontraditional education- or at least will not be harmed. I wish I could be reassuring, but, personally, I did not find the adjustment to be easy. Unfortunately I think this is simply the wrong question to ask, because I think the difficulty in adjusting actually illustrates the gift a Montessori education can be for the child experiencing it.

The best way to explain these points is simply to relate some of the challenges I had in making the change from Montessori to a traditional school. The school I moved to was a junior high school with many more children and teachers than my previous school (900 aged 12-15 versus 200 aged 3 to 12). We had individual classes for each subject and each subject was in a different room with a different teacher. The building was enormous to me and quite daunting on the first day. Still, all of that change was actually quite exciting and fun. Montessori children tend to be very adaptable and the newness of the large school was thrilling. I easily made friends and had many adventures. Academically I did well and was involved in many extra curricular activities. When parents ask me if I had a difficult adjustment, they are usually asking about the bigger school, the socialisation, and the academics. By those measures, I had no problems. However, there were a few incidents which illustrate why I think the adjustment was difficult:

During the first test I took, I was sent to the principal's office for "cheating". I had gone to the encyclopedias in the back of the room to look up a question I didn't know.

"Kristin - you cannot use your books to answer the test question. That is cheating!"

"But I don't know the answer."

I didn't have a concept of cheating because it simply made sense to me that if I didn't know something I should look it up and learn it. In terms of my adapting, this experience was more of a funny incident than a real difficulty. I learned easily what was expected of me and adapted, but the difficulty came in understanding the underlying philosophy of the school. I remember being a bit insulted by the whole testing process. Why was it necessary to have to show a teacher what I knew? At my Montessori school the teachers just knew what I knew because we discussed it, they read the reports I wrote, watched the skits that we performed and were inextricably involved in the daily process of learning, discovering, experimenting and researching. We did have tests, but they were either "licensing tests" (tests necessary to prove that we were ready to take on a task of great importance or some danger such as operating a jigsaw in the wood shop) or self-corrected tests whose purpose was to let the individual student understand what he/she knew and what needed more studying. I realised that at this new school the tests were given because they did not trust me to learn.

Similarly, on my first day of school, I got in trouble for talking and also for "wandering" in the classroom. The class had had a lecture during which I sat attentively. My family upbringing and Montessori experience taught me to respect teachers and, in fact, anyone who was talking. I think most Montessori kids would likewise not have a problem with the adjustment to sitting quietly in their seat while a teacher lectured. At the end of the lecture, the teacher gave us questions to answer based on her lecture. When I was finished, I asked her more about one question and her answer was "go sit down- you got it right." I asked her again, trying to clarify that I wanted more information. I don't even remember the subject, but I remember feeling slightly frustrated that she was not listening

to my question. Because I had answered her question correctly, it was as if she didn't need to delve any further into the subject regardless of my interest. When she refused again and told me to stop "wandering and return to my seat to wait", I sat down and spoke to the person next to me about my question. We were both done and I was absolutely perplexed when told by the other student that we were not allowed to talk.

Another time, again in the first week, I got up during a study session and excused myself to the people I was working with to go to the bathroom which was down the hall. The teacher came out of the classroom and grabbed me by the shoulder.

"How dare you leave my classroom without asking permission?"

"I had to go to the bathroom."

"Then you need to ask!"

"To go to the bathroom? Really?"

"You need a hall pass! You can't just walk around the school without a pass!"

These rules were entirely foreign to me. Once I learned them, I followed them easily, but I do remember feeling that insulted that the teacher could take away my right to move around and to talk quietly. I couldn't believe they didn't trust me to go to the bathroom and I couldn't really understand what protection a hall pass gave me- and from what? I immediately felt distrusted and defensive. As soon as I entered the school I could feel the teacher's glares as if we were all animals who had to be corralled into pens and fed information with a carrot and stick. I soon learned to go through enough of the motions to get good grades and keep the teachers quiet. However, this was diametrically opposed to the way I had felt at the Montessori school where active discussion was encouraged and no one would ever be told they did not have the freedom to walk around unless they were disturbing someone else. I know it sounds dramatic, but I remember feeling a great sense of loss. I literally felt my interest in learning slipping away. Although I was socially happy and getting good grades, I lost a great deal of interest in the world around me.

These experiences illustrate the different dynamic between teachers and students in a Montessori setting. Teachers were, if not my friends, at least my mentors. They were a resource I could go to to help find answers, a confidant in dealing with social issues, and the inspiration to push me to new endeavours and challenge new avenues for research. Though they often knew more about a given subject, they were not the keepers of knowledge or the enforcers of learning. They were certainly not the wardens of a prison or the disciplinarians of unruly children. Naturally, there were children who needed disciplining, but by twelve years old, most of us could be trusted not only to follow rules, but in the absence of such rules to determine for ourselves the appropriate conduct in a given situation. Of course there were children that the teachers had to work harder to engage and others that had a more immediate connection with the research. Still, we all loved what we were doing and knew that we were responsible for our own development. The teachers knew this and trusted us. In return we valued, trusted and loved them. Each morning when I entered the Montessori school, it felt like a more exciting version of home- a place where my opinions and my interests were valued, where people pushed me to never accept an answer as the end of a line of questioning, but to use that answer as a spark to a new source of research. I was valued and respected as a member of the learning community; my strengths were celebrated and my weaknesses supported.

There was also a respect for the natural ebb and flow of interest

and motivation. Of course behind the scenes the teachers worked tirelessly to make sure we covered all the bases and they were constantly angling to present material to us in a way that sparked our interest. I know this now, but from our point of view then, we simply felt we were on top of the world, in control of our destinies: pursuing our interests, always looking into new things, new experiences and new ideas and pushing those as far as we could. Often we would have a period of a few weeks where we were involved in a "great work"- a project of deep interest to us. We'd do other things during this time, but the majority of our time was spent pursuing the answers to a question that had grabbed our attention. The teachers worked subtly to make sure that in doing this research we used every available discipline, but to us we were simply immersed in whatever it was that drew our passion. At the end of this period of work (an end which was not imposed by outside forces, but was a natural self-determined ebb of interest, satisfaction with an answer, or pause before tackling a more complex version of the original question) there was usually a period of a few days where we did very little. We'd chat with each other, do some relatively unchallenging work, write stories, do simple math work, or just read. What seemed to be wasted time was one of my favourite memories- not because it was easy, but because it was the counterbalance to those intense times. The teachers accepted these plateaus and respected them. In doing so, I felt that my whole self was respected- the intense passionate one and the one who just wanted to sit and absorb. I did not have to continually prove to the teachers or to anyone that I was a "good student". Rather they supported me in my restful periods just as fully as they did in my intense ones. It was quite clear to me that the support was there to use as I needed, but no one was going to force me to learn. That was my decision, and by extension my responsibility. It was this acceptance of the whole self and the process of natural learning which created an environment where I was free to learn and even more, to become truly my own person, in charge of my own education and my own personal development.

It is my intention that these examples serve to illustrate more than just the differences between a Montessori elementary and a traditional one. What the comparison made clear to me is the different human being Montessori schooling creates- or allows to develop. I may be wrong, but from my experiences, I think that it would be very difficult to develop that same person with that same fundamental vision of him/herself and the world in a traditional school. It was even difficult for me to maintain that already concrete sense of personal responsibility when faced with the distrust and suspicion present in the new school. The teachers took the responsibility of the students' education away from them and as a result there was no trust or belief that the child could take it on himself. Without this expectation, the students, myself included, simply did what was necessary to satisfy expectations- namely to get good grades. If this happened to a degree even to me, I do not know how one would develop if their formative years were spent there.

Though I struggled with the underlying philosophy of the traditional school, I did learn to sit in my assigned row, take in the knowledge they gave me and give it back to them when asked. That was actually quite easy- just not altogether satisfying. I passed notes in class just like the others, skipped classes once in a while, took tests and did very well academically. The school I went to was an excellent school by outside standards. It was known to be very supportive of students and very nurturing of their development. In every measurable way, I adapted very easily and I was happy socially. However, I also immediately began looking at my options for other schools and I transferred to two other schools in the next two years before finding one that I liked.

I know this may scare parents reading this and I want to be clear because I think this is certainly one point where the Montessori philosophy really shaped me. By any outside measurement, I made the transition to "normal school" very well. In fact, had there been

no other choices for school, I would have graduated from the local school and been fine. The difference with my background is that I did not judge myself based on these outside measurements. I knew that I was not learning as much as I could. I realised that much of my time was spent on busy work and on satisfying the teacher's need to quantify what I knew. Because I had already developed a responsibility for my own learning, I was not willing to accept the limits of the school so I researched other schools and applied to both public and private ones. In the absence of passion at school, this became my "great work". I tried out several schools over the next few years before I found the one that, though not Montessori, offered an environment that trusted its students and encouraged discussion. It is important to note that this school was exceptionally strict- actually it was a boarding school 12 hours from my home and we still took tests and in some classes listened to lectures. It was not the structure of the school that I had trouble with. What was different about this school was that it was truly a community of learners and the feeling of respect, challenge, and inspiration that I was looking for was present. The teachers were excited by our questions and the discussions were lively, informed, and exciting. When we had an assigned reading, the subsequent class started from the premise that it had been read and the discussion extended the boundaries of the reading. The purpose of the classes were to go further- not to check if we had done the reading. It was what I had grown to expect from a school and I was not willing to accept less- even if I had to travel 900 miles to get there.

Many people have heard my story and say, "if it was so difficult for you, then maybe you should have left Montessori earlier" or suggest that there is something wrong with the Montessori approach if it is difficult to transition to a traditional school. I would offer the counter argument. There is something wrong with a traditional school if it takes away the love of learning from its students. It is a natural impulse to never want your child to have a difficult time, but I am so grateful to my mother for choosing a Montessori school for me. Yes, it was more difficult for me to adjust and yes, it was hard to change schools, but I am grateful that at twelve, I was capable of adapting and succeeding (by outside measurements) to the circumstance I was in while at the same time determining that it was not right for me by my own internal gauge. I am grateful that learning is part of who I am and as such it does not end with my last formal class, but will continue throughout my life. I am grateful for an environment during my formative years which trusted me to question because now I will always seek out answers and delve into mysteries- not because I am asked to, but because that seeking is part of who I am.

Perhaps that is the essence of a Montessori background - to experience a form of schooling which is so integral to ones' self development that the adult reflecting back really cannot separate "school" from "life". There is no "them" versus "us" to make that distinction. No one is imparting knowledge or granting permission to learn, to walk, or to use the bathroom. I cannot separate school from me because the essence of a Montessori education is that it is you. Reflecting back the adult remembers glimpses of knowledge, flashes of fun, excitement, triumph and defeats, but knows that in some inexplicable way, she is who she is because of the melding of an innate self and an environment which is truly designed to support the natural unfolding of that self. In that way, the Montessori schooling is so much more than a school. It is truly an "aid to life" with the long term goal not to impart knowledge, but to enable the individual to develop and grow to reach their own standards of justice, wisdom, and moral structure; in essence to reach their full potential as human beings and at a societal level to push that potential to its limits.

Reprinted with the kind permission of
The Montessori Society AMI UK