

# Montessori and traditional Education: Philosophical Perspectives and Approaches in Contrast

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Perspectives and Approaches in Contrast

by Tim Seldin

When we use the term “traditional education” we don’t mean to suggest that all of the other schools which are not officially “Montessori programs” are therefore “traditional.”

Montessori schools do not have a monopoly on the things that we believe and do in our classrooms, and a growing number of innovative teachers and child-centered educational models have adopted elements of the Montessori approach in their effort to design more effective schools.

It would not be accurate to imagine that the world’s schools are divided up into only two groups: those that follow a Montessori approach and those that believe in traditional education. In fact, Montessori is based on a set of beliefs that many other child-centered educators share. These child-centered educators have either attempted to implement elements of the Montessori approach in their programs, or have independently developed models of their own that have many things in common with the Montessori Way. Unfortunately, the majority of schools around the world are more or less traditional in both perspective and practices. So what is the difference?

Montessori and Traditional education each follow distinctly different approaches which are based on their own set of assumptions about the nature of children's intelligence, the nature of effective teaching, beliefs about what is the best way to motivate students to learn, and differing perspectives about what is the appropriate relationship between students, teachers, and parents.

In the past, many people, including many Montessori educators, assumed that there was an all or nothing divide between Montessori and the rest of education. This did not endear Montessori to the thousands of innovative teachers who loudly have cried, "I may not be a Montessori teacher, but I do these things in my classroom too!" We are left with the fact that some schools who do not call themselves Montessori may offer some of the things normally associated with Montessori education, leaving the real divide not between Montessori and non-Montessori education, but between Montessori/child centered approaches based on partnership and community, and the much more prevalent and familiar traditional approach.

In recent years, many educational reformers have discovered for themselves the validity of the principles and practices that we see as the building blocks of Montessori classrooms. Some are aware of the connection of these principles and practices to Dr. Maria Montessori; others have no idea. But we can take pride as more schools experiment with

elements of the Montessori Way.

On the other hand, America is presently obsessed with tests, achievement and accountability, all of which are leading a far great numbers of classrooms away from a child-centered approach to one focused on test scores and an attempt to impose order and discipline through power and authority. We are living in an era when many schools boast of their high standards, challenging program, and return to the "Basics."

The significance of Dr. Maria Montessori's work was not simply that she the first to clearly articulate and popularize these ideas and put them into practice, but that she then went on to organize them into a systematic and revolutionary model of education that is effective, adaptable, sustainable, and replicable around the world.

There is a set of principles and practices behind the approach that most of us call traditional.

There is another set of principles and practices based on partnership, not domination; mentoring rather than control, and a sense of community rather than a sense of intimidation. We call this The Montessori Way.

"I had always understood that Madame Montessori dispensed with discipline and I wondered how she managed a room full of children . . . On sending my little boy of three to spend his mornings in a Montessori school, I found that he quickly became

a more disciplined human being .

The pedagogical discoveries involved have required genius but the teachers who are to apply them do not require genius. They require only the right sort of training, together with a degree of sympathy and patience, which is by no means unusual.

The fundamental idea is simple: that the right discipline consists not in external compulsion, but in habits of mind, which lead spontaneously to desirable rather than undesirable activities. What is astonishing is the great success in finding technical methods of embodying this idea in education. For this, Madame Montessori deserves the highest praise.

-Bertrand Russell, from ON EDUCATION

A Glimpse Into A Traditional Educator's

Thoughts Recently we came across the following note from a teacher with many years of experience in traditional classrooms, who was seeking a position as a long-term substitute. It offers an insight into a very different philosophy of education and underscores what we believe is the most important difference between Montessori and traditional classrooms: our attitudes toward students and our beliefs about whether or not students will learn and grow without external direction, rewards, and punishments imposed by adults.

Clearly this teacher loves to teach and cares about his students. He has simply spent years working

within a very different educational context than we create in Montessori classrooms.

Dear Administrators,

I would like to offer you my services as an all-purpose substitute teacher. I'm willing to accept just about any assignment you would ask me to consider, at any grade level, K-12.

I get along well with students of all ages, ability levels, and any socioeconomic status, even those with special needs. I have effectively educated some next-to-impossible to- educate students, despite their learning disabilities, and bad attitudes toward school, teachers, authority figures, etc.

I don't just cover the classes to which I'm assigned. I teach the course content, explaining the material as clearly and thoroughly as I can. I follow the lesson plan provided as closely as possible. I make every effort to identify those in need of tutorial assistance and give them the help they need. I monitor all the student behaviors in my classroom closely.

With my many years of experience, I can sense when disorder can start to occur, and when it does, I "nip it in the bud."

I do not permit any unnecessary conversations, and I change seats when students get along too well or antagonize each other. I discourage inappropriate behavior in a diplomatic, tactful, businesslike manner. I expect my students to do their work, comply with my directives, and treat everyone with civility at all times. When anyone is mistreated, I suggest a nicer way to handle a

similar situation in the future.

Students who commit misconduct are informed they'll face the same consequences their regular teacher would provide.

Obviously there are many children who do very well in traditional classrooms, and dedicated teachers can be found in every school. On the other hand, as different as Montessori may appear, it clearly works and works very well.

Again, two questions are most often asked. They are "What makes the two systems of education different?" and "Which is more effective?"

We believe that there is a more appropriate question to ask: "Since we know that some children learn well in one system or the other, which approach is a better fit for a particular child.?"

Some children simply cannot cope with choices, distractions, or limits that are not fixed in stone.

Most respond more to warmth, honesty, and respect rather than authoritarian control; collaboration rather than assignments; self-discipline rather than imposed order; and a relationship between teachers and students that is based on mentorship and mutual caring. Some children need the firm boundaries of a system based on adults who are firmly in charge.

But what could better prepare children for the real world than years of training in becoming increasingly independent, making their own decisions, organizing their own time, developing problem solving skills, and learning life-long

lessons in friendship and everyday courtesy? There is a fundamental spirit of kindness and respect that normally permeates a Montessori school anywhere around the world. Most parents of Montessori students sense it, but few appreciate how important it really is in the development and education of their sons and daughters. Conversely, there is a very different spirit that permeates most schools, both public and private. It is a spirit of meanness found on most playgrounds. It is a culture of pressure, rules, and petty rewards and punishments. It is a spirit of adult rules imposed on children, because we assume that they will accomplish little and will create havoc without external structure. It is a culture of letter grades, test scores, and demerits.

Even today, the machinery of many schools is lubricated by fear – fear that without adult controls, children will get into trouble, fear that without external pressure, they will not learn. The endless debate about accountability and the concern that children will not be prepared is all based on fear.

What are we afraid of...that our children will not be able to succeed in kindergarten, junior high, college, and life? The sad thing is that education is the very guardian of civilization; yet, while every other field, from metallurgy to medicine, has advanced through the years, traditional education is based on methods that are far less effective than those used by the Iroquois Confederation two hundred years ago or by the apprenticeship system

during the Middle Ages.

Once upon a time, we understood that the purpose of education was to bring the young into the community of adults; to teach them how to be like us, to be our equals. Yes, there is a distinction between the young and the adult, between the apprentice and the master, but it is clear that the young are there to learn how to learn the things that we know, to join their parents and other adults as full members of the society in which they will live. All too many schools today teach in a never-never land divorced from the greater society. How can we teach children to live in a democracy, when they spend 15 years living under a benevolent dictatorship?

In too many classrooms, education is based on domination rather than partnership, community and respect. Despite decades of attempts to reform education, our schools still depend on adult-established external structure, rewards, and punishments to motivate and control children. Rather than inspire a passion for learning and a sense of wonder by encouraging students to explore ideas and pursue meaningful work, our schools teach students to be passive and compliant, cynical, sarcastic and cool.

One hundred years since the days when primers, drills, and the hickory stick were the norm, there are still many classrooms where students are taught to memorize answers without understanding or retention, rather than to think.

Too often teachers teach not what is current,

vibrant, or of compelling interest to their students, but what is mandated by the state curriculum and what will be measured on the tests required by their schools.

The true mission of a school shouldn't be centered on test scores and performance levels. We operate schools to help children grow up to become caring adults, loving parents, effective leaders, positive team members, fine members of their communities, inventors, entrepreneurs, creators of civilization, thinkers, "doers," citizens of the world, and stewards of the earth.

We would suggest that ultimately the mission of a school should be to raise mentally healthy, mature, and self-actualized adults by deliberate design, producing them in numbers far greater than tend to occur by chance.

Many schools operate as if intelligence is rare and children are fundamentally silly and lazy. Currently, having abandoned corporal punishment some years ago, we are attempting to coerce students to learn more through high-stakes tests. The true results have been a great deal of political rhetoric around election time and high stress and poor morale among principals, teachers, and sixty million school children across America.

In hundreds of thousands of schools in large cities and small towns across the United States, teachers are under a terrible burden because the people in charge believe that tests are the answer. Poor test scores reflect on teachers' salaries and job security. Millions of teachers are fed up, defensive, and

looking for another career. Over the next few years, it is projected that America will face a shortage of five million teachers, and, despite the rhetoric, no one really knows how to solve the crisis in our classrooms.

We hold teachers accountable for their children's performance, which sounds logical until you recall that the goal of a teacher is not to coerce, but to inspire their children's curiosity, imagination, and passion to learn. The facts are simple. We may or may not prepare students for the next test, but we are doing an appallingly poor job of preparing them for life. The evidence is all around us.

Violence in our schools and youth violence in our communities is everyday news. Road rage and drunk driving among young people is becoming increasingly common. Concerns over body image have made eating disorders a disease that touches many young girls. The use of drugs and alcohol, casual sex, and date rape are routine aspects of modern campus life from middle school onward. Across the nation in

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our best schools, college students die every year as a result of drug abuse, binge drinking, and riotous behavior. For example, over the past two years two students at M.I.T died from alcohol poisoning. Last Spring thousands of students at the University of Maryland rioted for two days, doing millions of

dollars of damage to businesses and homes in the surrounding community, because their team made it to the NCAA finals. It is a rare year in most high schools when at least one photograph isn't bordered in black, indicating a young man or woman who died in a senseless car accident or by his or her own hand.

As the world responds in shock and horror to the violence that seems to be infecting our American schools, many more people are beginning to ask the questions that Riane Eisler poses in her book, *Tomorrow's Children: Why are some people violent and cruel? Why do some of us feel the need to hurt and kill? Is it simply human nature? Is that why violence seems to be infecting so many children? If so, why are some people caring and peaceful? What pushes us in one direction or another?*

Ironically, most adults cannot see the connection between the school's that we've built today and the children who will grow into adulthood tomorrow. Too many schools are confused about what is really important or how they can possibly accomplish it. Most are too large and impersonal. One-ups-man-ship and petty cruelty are so common that they have become the background noise of modern life with children. While inner city schools stand out in their despair, many schools that seem bright and shiny on the surface are filled with sarcastic, cynical children who are easily bored or who are focused on looking cool and being popular. There are so many assaults on our children's self image and self-esteem all around us on TV, in the movies,

and on the playgrounds that it is no wonder that it has become so difficult to raise nice kids in these crazy times.

Ask yourself how many students would voluntarily go to school every day if their friends were not there and if there were no consequences if they skipped? Then consider how many children skip school anyway, how many ultimately drop out along the way, and how many do what they have to do to pass, but get little out of their education beyond an ulcer and a diploma. Every year since the 1960s has seen one study after another bemoaning the poor state of American education. There is indeed a crisis in American education, but it isn't the mediocre student performance that we read about on a daily basis. The issue lies in an area that we often do not see as the root of poor performance: our children's self-esteem, hearts, and souls.

We spend billions of dollars a year on what is essentially a self-defeating and meaningless exercise. Instead of connecting children to the adult world and society in which they will live, we teach to the test.

The problem is not with poor teachers. The problem is one of poor design in the basic systems and assumptions that underlie the multi-billion-dollar-a-year American educational machine. Education in America is big business. It begins with the value of property in your neighborhood, which are driven to a large degree by the perceived degree of excellence or mediocrity of your local

schools. National and international suppliers of text books, tests, furniture, and school supplies and equipment market to a relatively small body of men and women who make decisions that drive a significant portion of the American economy. The superintendent of schools in your county or town may very well be the largest employer in town. Of all the students who graduate from our high schools, about 45% will be accepted in college after years of stressful assignments, high stakes examinations, and the dreaded SAT. And yet, on the first day at most colleges and universities, the freshman class will be warned that the student on either side of them will probably not be there in four years at graduation. Statistically the famous 'look to your left, look to your right' speech is no idle threat. In most schools of higher learning, more than 50% of the students who begin will drop out or be asked to leave before graduation. How can this be after all those standards were met, tests passed, grades earned?

The answer is simple. Intelligence may not be rare, but Emotional Intelligence, as Daniel Goleman calls it, is far from widespread among American students. We need a new vision of education in America, and we need it now!

Many of the social ills facing our culture can be prevented through the right sort of school experience, but the schools of today are simply not designed to do what needs to be done.

There is an answer. It works! It has a 96-year track record in tens of thousands of schools around

the world. It challenges the very foundations upon which most schools are built. It is consistent with the latest brain research and a century of pioneering work in psychology and mental health. We call the answer The Montessori Way. The Montessori Way –Partnership Education at Work The Montessori approach, first developed in Europe in the early years of the last century, is a highly successful educational approach that teaches partnership, peace, and mental health, along with basic skills and the knowledge. Montessori enjoys the four great characteristics of all great solutions to human challenges:

- β It is effective in raising intelligent and successful human beings,

- β The model can be successfully replicated in countless settings,

- β It is adaptable to any population and community; and

- β Educational programs set up along this model remain effective over the test of time. There are perhaps 5,000 Montessori schools in the United States and Canada, and tens of thousands more around the world. Montessori schools are found throughout Western Europe, Central and South America, Australia, New Zealand, and much of Asia. The movement is widespread in countries like the Netherlands, United Kingdom, Ireland, India, Sri Lanka, Korea, and Japan, and it is beginning to mushroom in Eastern Europe, the republics of the former Soviet Union, and China.

There is tremendous diversity within the

community of Montessori schools. Despite the impression that all Montessori schools are the same, perhaps a franchise like McDonald's, no two Montessori schools are the same. Montessori schools are different, profoundly different, from the familiar traditional classrooms that most of us attended in our childhood years.

Those of us who have spent years around Montessori children know that Montessori works! While the average person has heard of Montessori, most know little about it and have conflicting impressions of what Montessori reflects. This is nothing new or unique to our country. It has been the case since Dr. Montessori opened her first school in Rome in 1907.

The Montessori method is based on both a different philosophical paradigm and pedagogical approach than most of us experienced in our own educations. The essence of that difference involves several key elements:

β Montessori argued that high intelligence is not statistically rare and that it can be deliberately inspired and nurtured in most children, if approached correctly from the earliest years.

β Montessori believed that the most important years of a child's education are not the years of high school and college, but the first six years of life. As a result, Montessori schools regard infant and early childhood education as the very foundation of everything that follows.

β Montessori recognized the overwhelming importance of allowing children to develop a very

high degree of independence and autonomy from the adults around them. She saw a direct link between children's sense of self-worth, empowerment, and self-mastery, and our ability to learn and retain new skills and information.

β Montessori saw an effective education as a transition from one level of independence and self-reliance to the next, rather than as moving from the challenge of one examination to another.

β Montessori argued that children are born curious, creative, and motivated to observe and learn things. She dismissed the traditional notions of competition and external standards and reinforcement being the only effective way to motivate students to become well educated.

Montessori children learn from one another as much as from adults and collaborate rather than compete for honors and grades.

β Montessori recognized that every child is unique; a universe of one. Because they learn at their own pace and in their own best ways, she designed an education that actually allows students to learn at their own pace and to select freely from work that they find appealing.

β Montessori recognized the importance of multi-modality learning and that children learn and retain best through real-life application and problem solving.

β Montessori education gives children a sense of wonder and an honest sense of the interconnections between the people and nations of the earth, humanity and all living things, and the

ripple effects that each new idea and invention have on the rest of our culture, technology, economies, and ways of seeing the world.

β ... And, finally, there is the profound difference between the lines of authority and relationships between children and adults that is central to Montessori education. Teachers tend to ask the right questions rather than give children the correct answers. They serve as mentors, friends, and guides, rather than as task masters and disciplinarians. Students are treated with profound respect as equals, in partnership rather than with condescension, external control and domination. Partnership Education, a basic building block of the Montessori Way, described in some depth in Riane Eisler's book, *Tomorrow's Children*, offers a practical approach to creating schools that are profoundly different from that of the traditional school of thought that underlies traditional education.

This difference lies not simply in the subjects that we teach, but in the culture and relationships that tend to develop between parents, teachers and children here. Montessori is committed to inspiring children to think, create, and dream. Together, as families and school, we are instilling values on which our children, *Tomorrow's Children*, can build good lives; and creating a sense of mutual respect and community that begins with their classmates and extends out to the world.

The American Montessori Society offers the following comparisons between Montessori and Traditional Education ...

### Montessori

Emphasis is on cognitive structures and social development .

Teacher's role is unobtrusive; child actively participates in learning.

Environment and method encourage internal self-discipline; individual and group instruction adapts to each student's learning style.

Mixed-age grouping  
Children are encouraged to teach, collaborate, and help each other.

Children choose their own work from interests, abilities.

### Traditional

Emphasis is on rote knowledge and social development.

Teacher's role is dominant, active; child is a passive participant.

Teacher is primary enforcer of external discipline Individual and group instruction conforms to the adult's teaching style.

Same-age grouping  
Most teaching is done by the teacher; collaboration is discouraged.

Curriculum is structured with little regard for each child's interests.

Children formulate concepts from self-teaching materials .

Children work as long as they want on chosen projects.

Children set their own learning pace to internalize information.

Children spot their own errors through feedback from material.

Learning is reinforced internally through child's own repetition of activity, internal feelings of success repetition

Multi-sensory materials for physical exploration development.

Organized program for learning care of self and self-care environment (shoe

Children are guided to concepts by teachers.

Child usually given specific time for work

The pace of instruction is set by group norm or the teacher.

Errors are corrected by the teacher.

Learning is reinforced externally by rewards, discouragements.

Few materials for sensory, concrete manipulation.

Little emphasis on instruction or classroom maintenance.

polishing, sink  
washing, etc.)

Child can work where  
s/he is comfortable,  
move and talk at will  
(yet doesn't disturb  
others); group work is  
voluntary and  
negotiable

Child assigned seat;  
encouraged to sit still  
and listen during group  
sessions

Organized program for  
parents to understand  
the Montessori  
philosophy and  
participate in the  
learning process

Voluntary parent  
involvement, often only  
as fundraisers, not  
participants in  
understanding the  
learning process

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