

Renewing the Promise of Montessori Education

By Michael Strong

Before considering how to revive the original promise of Montessori education, we should look back to see what Maria Montessori originally believed that her approach could accomplish. The first chapter of *The Montessori Method*, published in 1912, in which Maria Montessori first states the goals and principles of her pedagogy, ends with a quotation from the anthropologist Giuseppe Sergi:

Sergi says truly: "To-day an urgent need imposes itself upon society: the reconstruction of methods in education and instruction, and he who fights for this cause, fights for human regeneration."

Montessori believed that her method would revolutionize the world by liberating humanity.

She believed that the existing pedagogy of her time amounted to slavery:

He who would say that the principle of liberty informs the pedagogy of to-day, would make us smile as at a child who, before the box of mounted butterflies, should insist that they were alive and could fly. The principle of slavery still pervades pedagogy, and, therefore, the same principle pervades the school.

The *moral* degradation of the slave is, above all things, the weight that opposes the progress of humanity—humanity striving to rise and held back by this great burden. The cry of redemption speaks far more clearly for the souls of men than for their bodies.

For Montessori, the liberation of children from the oppression of classroom slavery was the next great social cause and her method was to have been the beginning of the end of such slavery.

The key was to cultivate a child's internal motivation and then to "follow the child" rather than to use external motivation to force a child to do things that were not natural to her:

The prize and the punishment are incentives toward unnatural or forced effort, and, therefore we certainly cannot speak of the natural development of the child in connection with them. The jockey offers a piece of sugar to his horse before jumping into the saddle, the coachman beats his horse that he may respond to the signs given by the reins; and, yet, neither of these runs so superbly as the free horse of the plains.

She recognized, as well, that content coverage requirements were inconsistent with her principle of "follow the child," and thus led to the use of prizes and punishments:

We know only too well the sorry spectacle of the teacher who, in the ordinary

schoolroom, must pour certain cut and dried facts into the heads of the scholars. In order to succeed in this barren task, she finds it necessary to discipline her pupils into immobility and to force their attention. Prizes and punishments are every-ready and efficient aids to the master who must force into a given attitude of mind and body those who are condemned to be his listeners. . .

In her time, the law forced teachers to teach children to “pour certain cut and dried facts into the heads of the scholars” and “in order to succeed in this barren task” teachers must use prizes and punishments.

We are approaching the 100th anniversary of Montessori’s Casa de Bambini. It is time to look back and acknowledge that, for all the progress that Montessori education has made in the past century, it has not fulfilled the grand promise that Montessori herself perceived in it.

There are those skeptics, of course, who would have us believe that Montessori was simply deluded, that Montessori education may be a good thing but that it was absurd to have thought that any educational method could make much of a difference in society at large.

The Living Promise of Montessori Education

As someone who has spent six years working in pre-K through 8 Montessori schools, primarily at the middle school level, and who has been part of the Montessori movement for more than ten years, I believe that Montessori was fully justified in her belief that Montessori principles could transform the world. Moreover, we are at a point in history at which, after 100 years of quiescence, we may soon be able to realize Montessori’s original dream.

Before explaining how we might revive her original dream on a large scale, I want to point out a couple of vignettes to explain why I think that her original dream is plausible:

Shortly after I arrived at The Emerson School in Palo Alto to create a Montessori middle school program there, three upper elementary girls, who would be entering the middle school in the fall, asked if they could speak to me. It turns out that they had been examining algebra textbooks and were requesting that I use a specific textbook in the middle school.

Now as someone who has also spent ten years working in non-Montessori schools, public and private, and consulted in hundreds more, the notion that sixth grade girls would unilaterally initiate a textbook adoption process, for algebra no less, and then present their findings openly, maturely, and politely to an adult male school director whom they had just met, is truly extraordinary. In the Montessori world, however, such behaviors are not surprising – children who have been educated in a system designed to cultivate initiative and independence *learn initiative and independence*.

It seems odd to have to persuade outsiders that a system designed to cultivate these traits succeeds in doing so (Montessori) whereas a system that is not designed to cultivate these traits

does not do so (conventional education). And yet those skeptics who do not believe in the potential of Montessori education to transform the world don't take seriously that when one sets out to cultivate key characteristics in a well-designed system – one succeeds. And the older I get, the more I believe that character traits such as initiative and independence have a lot more to do with both personal and professional success than do test scores (though, of course, our 8th grade graduating class had an average SAT score higher than that of the average 12th grade private school SAT score).

A second vignette:

Upon opening the middle school, about half the incoming students were normalized Montessori students and the other half came from public schools. Among those who came from the public schools were three girls who had already adopted typical public middle school girl culture – jaded and cynical, heavy make-up and provocative clothing, socially successful cool girls. The internal Montessori culture, boys and girls alike, was sweet, open, innocent, and full of a love for learning and friendly camaraderie. The new girls hated the Montessori middle school and complained about how uncool the kids were. They lobbied their moms hard to let them return to “a normal school” so that they could get away from these weirdo kids who liked learning and being nice.

Gradually, after about six or eight weeks, the new girls began to change and adapt to the Montessori culture. By the end of the year they enjoyed the friendly, open environment and they (mostly) loved learning.

When the original Montessori students approached middle school graduation, although they knew they were going to miss Emerson School, they also were excited about entering the big world and having new experiences. When the oldest of the girls from the public school cohort approached graduation, she cried and cried bitter tears – she did not want to have to return to the culture of brutality she had known before, in which she knew that she would have to pretend to be jaded and cynical, and in which she would no longer be allowed to express the same love of learning and community that had been her daily nourishment at the Montessori school.

Again, skeptics often don't believe, first of all, that American teen culture could be anything other than what it is. When I describe how wonderful the peer culture is in many Montessori adolescent programs, the response of many is first that it can't really exist, and then that if it does exist it is unnatural and that kids ought to be exposed to the rough-and-tumble of public middle school life. I always reply by pointing out that, in my adult life, the only time that I experience boredom as numbing as experienced in public school is when I have to renew my driver's license, and I never experience interpersonal cruelty as an adult. Outside a few elite suburban districts, public middle schools have mostly become brutality factories, and it is terrifying that caring parents glibly accept it everyday.

The next line in the skeptic's defense, if they accept that Montessori peer culture may be more positive than that in many schools, is that it is only possible in the rarified atmosphere of a

private school. They falsely believe that the distinctive culture is entirely due to the exclusion of difficult students. Although it may well be easier to create such an atmosphere in a private school that can exclude students, it is also possible to create such positive cultures in public schools, which has been done in various public school magnet and charter programs. Montessori education creates more positive cultures by means of working with the child's natural propensities instead of working against them: "Follow the child" is the key Montessori slogan.

Montessori schools create more positive cultures not merely by means of a curriculum that can be easily ported into a conventional classroom, but by means of a deeply integrated pedagogical program that reduces the incidence of boredom and cruelty. To begin with, boredom and cruelty are related phenomena in conventional schools: if children are encouraged to take initiative to learn how to choose their learning year after year in a prepared environment, they find productive activity to be satisfying for its own sake and they have less need to express aggression towards others. In addition, in a Montessori environment, the Montessori guide spends a lot less time "teaching" in the sense of standing in front of the class (almost none, in fact), and a lot more time interacting with children one-on-one and in small groups. In the moment-to-moment texture of these daily interactions, the Montessori guide is constantly building relationship and coaching children on behavior and boundaries in a positive, loving manner. And, because the texture of the day is made up of personal relationships between student and teacher, rather than the impersonality of a distant authority, young people come to bond with, respect, and love their teachers in a manner that happens more rarely in a conventional setting.

It is also worth point out that Montessori herself had a profound commitment to beauty, wellness, wholesomeness, and positive human development in a manner that strikes some as old-fashioned. Many contemporary Montessori educators extend Montessori principles by rightly paying attention to the role of sugar, television, and other foods and entertainments in the upbringing of children. Indeed, many Montessori schools offer courses in parent education that, in addition to transmitting Montessori educational principles, provide guidance to parents concerning what sorts of nutrients, activities, and entertainments at home best support the school environment. This has become a very important issue in a world in which many parents appear to be clueless concerning how to raise kind, healthy, well children – in a world in which professional wrestling is the most popular show among adolescent males and the best selling computer game allows teenage boys to use and then murder a prostitute, it is not surprising that Mary Pipher calls American teen culture "a girl destroying place." Creating teen cultures of wellness, for boys and girls alike, is an urgent need in our society today.¹

While this is not the place to provide a full explanation of the thousands of ways in which Montessori schools create distinctive cultures, it is important to understand that "the Montessori method" is an integral whole that relies critically on the combination of philosophy, principles, pedagogy, method, materials, environment, teacher training, and school certification. Great Montessori schools are, today, on a very small scale, succeeding at the task of "human regeneration" that Maria Montessori dreamed of. So why hasn't the larger social regeneration

¹ See Michael Strong, "The Creation of Conscious Culture Through Educational Innovation," <http://www.flowproject.org/Downloads/Conscious-Culture.pdf>

taken place? If Montessori schools are so good, why do they continue to exist only at the margins of our educational system?

Are We Approaching the Montessori Moment?

Before specifying the obstacles to the dramatic growth and flourishing of Montessori education, and the forthcoming opportunities for the growth and flourishing of the same if those obstacles were to be removed, it is worth pointing out what a politically auspicious moment this could be for the fulfillment of Montessori's original vision. There are two reasons why this is an auspicious moment for Montessori education: The rise of the cultural creatives and the new set of workplace and professional skills needed in the 21st century.

The most visible symbol of the rise of the cultural creatives is the extraordinary growth of the health foods industry. Thirty years ago, health food stores were tiny places run by hippies selling grains out of mason jars and trying to get us to eat carob instead of chocolate. Today, Whole Foods Market is in the Forbes 500 list of the largest corporations on earth and Safeway and Albertsons have a health food aisle. Thirty years ago most Americans outside of New York, Seattle, San Francisco, and New Orleans had no idea what an espresso was; now there is a Starbucks on every corner. And now there are chains of yoga studios as yoga becomes mainstream. Paul Ray, author of *The Cultural Creatives*, estimates that they make up 30% of the population, with a higher percentage of the younger people. If these people had access to affordable, high quality Montessori education, most of them would enroll their children. Given the opportunity, it is not difficult to imagine 20-30% of our children attending Montessori schools. Indeed, at one point in the 1990s, 25% of charter schools being created in Colorado were Montessori-based.

The other reason to expect dramatic growth of Montessori education is due to the fact that, done right, it provides an ideal education for personal and professional success in the 21st century. I once had the CEO of a Silicon Valley company tour our middle school classroom and he exclaimed as he looked around and saw a room full of young adults focused on their work "How do you do it? This is exactly what I want my employees to be doing!" Employers increasingly want employees who work independently, who take initiative, who think for themselves, who figure out what needs to be done and do it. In a world of constant change, it is ridiculous to learn one rote skill in the expectation that one will have one career. Moreover, all of the rote jobs that can be done via telecom will be done by workers in the developing world. Americans who want good jobs will have to be dynamic, original thinkers.² The first K-12 chain of high quality Montessori schools that reliably cultivates these skills will grow faster than Whole Foods has grown. As 50% or more of our society receive an ever-improving Montessori education, we will experience large scale "human regeneration" that exceeds Maria Montessori's wildest dreams.

² See Daniel Pink, *A Whole New Mind* and Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*.

Obstacles to the Realization of the Montessori Moment

So what stands in the way of this dream? There are two primary culprits that have fatally undermined the widespread flourishing of Montessori education: Academic departments of education and government regulation of education.

Academia has never been friendly to Montessori education, oscillating between hostility and neglect. In 1914, after Montessori's highly successful celebrity tour of the U.S. in 1912, William Kilpatrick, an enormously popular and influential professor at Columbia Teachers College, the most prestigious teachers college in the nation, wrote a scathing critique of Montessori education that destroyed Montessori's influence in the U.S. for a more than a generation.

The 1960s saw a revival of Montessori education based on parental interest and commitment, but academia has continued to neglect or attack Montessori. A 1984 article by mainstream education researchers titled "Montessori and Regular Preschools: A Comparison" concludes:

Both educators and parents should be suspicious of a system that a) ignores recent educational thinking, especially in regard to using a modern understanding of child development to inform educational practice; b) trains teachers in isolation from all other teachers; c) accepts a low standard of teacher preparation (as measured by level of intake, length of training, rigor of training, credentials of the trainers, and acceptability of the credential); d) conceptualizes teacher education as an exercise in learning how to present the Montessori materials to children; e) defines education narrowly, paying scant attention to gross motor development, social skills, language and literature, creativity, and the arts; f) uses a harsh, outmoded system of discipline; and g) limits parental involvement.³

This is a remarkably haughty misunderstanding of Montessori education. In 2004 I spoke with a Montessori-trained education professor at a community college who found that her colleagues were openly disapproving of her for teaching Montessori pedagogy in her education courses; for many years the standard textbook approach has been a polite mention in a sentence or two in the midst of hundreds of pages devoted to others.

The fact that university departments of education have a monopoly on teacher licensure programs means that anyone who wants to teach at a public school, and in some states in a private school, must study education at a university. And the incentives to do so, rather than obtain a Montessori credential, are extraordinary. Although public school teacher salaries vary dramatically from state to state, in many states the salary ladder eventually exceeds \$100,000 in a salary and benefit package. In Montessori schools the market is much thinner, and teacher salary and benefit packages rarely exceed \$50,000. Thus a bright young person, with student loans and aspirations to raise a family, who wants to teach in elementary or secondary school, is faced with a choice between one life path in which he or she will have tens of thousands of jobs

³From Simons and Simons, "Montessori and Regular Pre-Schools: A Comparison," in L.G. Katz (Ed.) *Current Topics in Early Childhood Education*, 6. (Norwood, NJ: Ablex) 1984. Quoted in Doug Ryniker, *Montessori Life*, Winter 2001, pg. 46.

to choose from in every community in the U.S. which will pay, over the course of their lifetime, around \$3 million, vs. a life path in which he or she will only have a handful of jobs in a handful of communities, and earn one half or one third as much. The public school facilities are likely to be far better funded, the working hours shorter, and the support staff much greater. As a consequence, faced with a choice between taking Montessori training, on the one hand, and a university teacher licensure program, on the other, very few choose Montessori.

There are, increasingly, public school Montessori programs and even a few university programs that combine Montessori credentialing with public school licensure. Thus there are increasing, but still too few, opportunities for the resolution of the problem above.

Unfortunately, while there are great Montessori charter and public school programs, often run by courageous educators, they are fighting an uphill battle. Particularly in the era of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), public Montessorians are forced to teach standard public school curricula and prepare students for annual standardized tests. In many conventional programs, schooling is becoming year-long test prep. To Montessori knew 100 years ago that school-as-content-coverage was inconsistent with her method:

Often the education of children consists in pouring into their intelligence the intellectual content of school programmes. And often these programmes have been compiled in the official department of education, and their use is imposed by law upon the teacher and the child.

While superb public school Montessorians can sort of preserve the spirit of Montessori even under such circumstances, this is not the path to flourishing Montessori education that prepares children for the 21st century.

Montessori education is fundamentally about the liberation of the human spirit. In order to liberate millions, rather than thousands, of young human spirits, Montessori educators need educational freedom. Fortunately, the U.S. is moving towards greater educational freedom. It is important that Montessori educators, parents, boards, and alumni ensure that this movement towards educational freedom supports Montessori education rather than destroys it.

The School Choice Movement: Friend or Foe?

After “100 Years of Failed School Reform,” as the title of one book describes it, or “Tinkering Towards Utopia,” as another describes it, an increasing number of people have become concerned about education in the U.S. For the past forty years spending has gone up and performance has gone down. Our society is now committed to deep structural change in our educational institutions because of the remarkable history of repeated failure. These changes will most certainly include greater opportunities to create new kinds of institutions; the pressing question is, will an authentic Montessori be allowed to be among the new kinds of institutions.

Holland has had school choice since the late 19th century. Sweden, New Zealand, British Columbia, and Vermont are among the other nations or regions that have had greater or lesser experience with school choice. Minnesota pioneered charter schools in the U.S. in the early 1990s, and there are now thousands of schools in almost all fifty states. Several states or municipalities have limited voucher or tax credit experiments taking place. If one were to survey school choice legislation across the U.S. in the past fifteen years, despite various steps backwards, one would see steady progress towards greater choice.

Moreover there is every reason to believe that this progress will accelerate. A majority of parents of young children favor school choice, rising to nearly 90% of inner city parents of young children. The only demographic that solidly supports existing public schools, other than the teachers' unions, are older people who attended far more successful public schools two generations ago. As those people age, and as more young people realize the wonderful opportunities for their own children and the children of others available by means of choice, we will see an ongoing expansion of educational alternatives.

School choice represents both an extraordinary opportunity and an extraordinary danger for Montessori education. If educational vouchers and tax credits become available so that parents from all socio-economic brackets may send their children to private Montessori schools, in thirty years we may see 30% or more of our young people receiving a transformative education. We may see large, highly professional chains of Montessori schools with well-paid staffs and ongoing research and development into ever-more sophisticated curricula and materials: the Whole Foods Market of Montessori.

The danger, of course, is that vouchers and tax credits became available – but with strings (or golden chains) attached. If, for instance, vouchers and tax credits became available with “accountability” provisions that resembled those specified by NCLB, liberating Montessori would limp along for the next 100 years much as it has limped along for the past 100. Many other private and parochial schools could adapt their programs easily enough to NCLB requirements because most of them are already more or less following the standard model.

At present private Montessori schools find themselves at a severe disadvantage because parents have the option of sending their children to public school for free. If a voucher program was passed with NCLB-style restrictions, those parents would then have the option of sending their child to any school, public or private, that accepted NCLB-style restrictions. Any unusual school, such as Montessori, Waldorf, or Sudbury Valley, that wanted to maintain its integrity, would find that there were even fewer parents willing to send their children to their schools because now they would be competing with free private schools.

Some Montessori schools would accept the restrictions in order to accept parents with vouchers, but they would then find themselves in the same ongoing, frustrated state as do existing Montessori charter and magnet schools. Insidiously the mission of “teach to the test,” perhaps in the context of independent work periods, would replace “follow the child.” Prizes and punishments would gradually become more necessary in order to ensure that Montessori

“guides” were able to pour the state-required cut-and-dried facts into the children’s heads. And we would soon find ourselves once again recalling Montessori’s reproach:

Ah, before such dense and willful disregard of the life which is growing within these children, we should hide our heads in shame and cover our guilty faces with our hands!

As private Montessori schools that truly followed the child became rarer and rarer, closing one by one in the face of competition from an array of free schools, a few old timers would gradually recall the original Montessori dream as it faded into oblivion.

Educational Freedom and the Liberation of Montessori Education

One of my favorites sayings is “If it can’t be abused, its not freedom.” For those who respect the wisdom of ancient myths, it might be worth considering that the Judaic God chose to give angels and men freedom, knowing that some would fall. Part of the perfection of his creation was the wisdom to allow for bad choices.

In order to allow superb Montessorians to create schools and training programs that ever-more perfectly follow the child, we have to allow enough freedom for schools that might seem irresponsible. Truly following the child might mean that some children should not read until late, some children should not be taking tests while they are young, and that most of the time we need the freedom to teach individualized curricula that differ from the state standards. As we obtain more school choice options, which we most certainly will in the years to come, it is very important that they include the freedom to follow the child.

It is fair that with government funding should come some kind of accountability. Properly understood, however, parental choice itself should be the only kind of accountability required. If a school is not satisfying parents, they may send their children elsewhere. When teachers’ unions and other public school advocates complain that charter schools and private schools that receive government money ought to “be held to the same standards to which public schools are held” they are implicitly strangling anything newer and better in education – including, most emphatically, a revived Montessori movement.

Joel Slotkin, a Montessori teacher who wants to create an organic farm school, has written an article titled “Everything I want to do is illegal.” His article is focused entirely on the organic farming side of the equation, and lists the extensive legal and regulatory obstacles to creating a simple organic farm. But unless the forthcoming school choice legislation allows for remarkable freedoms in education, some of us may soon find that everything that we want to do is illegal.

Conversely, if vouchers or tax credits are passed with minimal strings attached, such that a school may hire its own teachers, follow its own curriculum, and, most importantly, follow the child, then we will finally achieve Maria Montessori’s original vision. In order to renew the promise of Montessori education, we need to advocate for a means of allowing parents and students to choose what kind of education they want. If we are able to create educational choice

that allows sufficient autonomy for authentic Montessori education – through minimally regulated charter schools, educational vouchers, or tuition tax credits – then we will see high-quality, well-funded Montessori schools grow rapidly in the years to come. We will finally be able to achieve Maria Montessori’s vision of a transformative educational program that transforms society.

She who fights for this cause “fights for human regeneration.”