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Essential Articles on Parenting and Education

Montessori Transitions

Into, Within and Beyond

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With regard to the child, education should correspond to them, so that instead of dividing the schools into nursery, primary, secondary and university, we should divide education in planes and each of these should correspond to the phase the developing individuality goes through.

Dr. Maria Montessori

Whenever parents, college students, or prospective teachers visit our Montessori school, inevitably the question is asked, “Where do students go after they leave the school?” In fact, how students transition into, within and beyond a Montessori school is often a concern for parents and educators unfamiliar with Montessori education. Accurate, thoughtful answers are particularly critical in New York City, where there are so many schools and unique school cultures from which to choose. Once families and students come to know the Montessori approach, they find that all of these transitions happen quite naturally.

My Own Transition

Eight years ago I became head of Brooklyn Heights Montessori School, a two-year-old through eighth grade school. After 28 years of working in traditional schools, I discovered the educational philosophy of Dr. Maria Montessori, and quickly found several of its tenets that I could easily embrace. Here are a few:

- Classes are composed of mixed-age groupings (ages three to six, six to nine, nine to twelve, etc.) through adolescence; students remain in the same classroom for a three-year cycle.
- A prepared environment nurtures freedom of choice, self-discipline, and personal responsibility.

- The teacher is facilitator (guide-on-the-side), as opposed to imparter of knowledge (sage-on-the-stage).
- The student learns through self-discovery.
- The learning environment fosters an uninterrupted work period each day—ideally, a block of three hours.
- Learning is best when the student is motivated from within and not through extrinsic rewards.
- There is deep respect for the student.

The benefits of the Montessori environment and philosophy are continually confirmed for me as I stand at the front door of school each morning, greeting students and parents. They are evident when I see fourth and fifth graders inching to walk ahead of their parents, demonstrating the need to test a newly found independence. But the best part is that parents — while they don't want to let go—understand that the promotion of their students' curiosity and need for independence is part of the Montessori plan.

For Students, a Seamless Passage

The second three-year cycle (at our school, grades one through three) is a time of a new academic growth. Reading; numeration; the world beyond home, neighborhood, and school; how things work; and life's patterns are all part of these years. Students learn from one another and at their own pace by getting to experience being the youngest, the middle, and then the oldest in the class. Through this period they learn from the older role models in their class, and eventually, when they become those role models, they consolidate their learning through teaching what they know to younger classmates. By the time students are at the end of this three-year cycle they are ready to transition to the next cycle of development.

Transitions within Montessori schools are rather seamless. Dr. Montessori knew when the student was ready to move on and at the same time knew to keep transitions to a minimum. Changing teachers and classroom

environment every ten months, as students do in a more traditional setting, can be daunting for a child. (Imagine as an adult having to change your work environment and boss every ten months.) Here, the underlying Montessori tenets remain constant throughout each stage of development and, although academic expectations will change during each three-year cycle, students know what to expect in their environment.

Becoming Self-Directed Citizens

From the very beginning, students learn to build an identity for themselves while developing close, respectful, and meaningful relationships with other students and adults. Teachers model this behavior and guide students to be thoughtful of the needs of others. This comes naturally to a third grader who lends a hand to a new first grader. The same is true for the first grader learning from the third grader, or the three-year-old learning from the kindergarten student, or the fourth grader learning from the sixth grader. Because they are part of a three-year cycle in a mixed-age setting, students get to know and help each other over several years and learn to work through difficult times with their friends or peers. This sets the stage for a better understanding of the larger world and a desire to help others as they grow past adolescence.

The outcome of a Montessori education I love most, however, is that students are always eager to take on new challenges. The notion that the Montessori setting is ideal for creating self-starting, self-motivated students is supported by Daniel Pink, author of *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. After all, what better environment for learning than one that promotes independence, mastery, purpose, responsibility and respect. Students develop competence through self-will, self-direction, and self-discipline not an over confidence, but an excitement to apply what is already learned to what isn't yet learned. This competence becomes significant when Montessori students are ready to graduate from the eighth grade and go on to a more traditional school.

Leaving Montessori

Having worked in middle school education most of my career and being responsible for secondary school placements for 20 of those years, I

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have observed many students make the transition from eighth grade to high school. I have come to view Montessori students as adept, successful individuals who gracefully make the transition to high school. They can think for themselves, know how and when to

speak up, and have a confidence that empowers them to see themselves as part of the solution and not part of the problem. All of these character traits help students become more accepting of their environment and understand problem solving.

The transitions students make into, within and beyond a Montessori education are about solidifying student work so they can carry on independently. Students who graduate from Montessori schools successfully go on to a wide variety of secondary schools. Year after year Montessori students prove that they are ready for new challenges.

Ultimately, the most important transition in the life of a human being is the transition to adulthood. That is where we spend the majority of our years, and it is why development and education in our first 15 years are so crucial. The independence that is fostered in those early years plays a significant role in how adults care for themselves and others. I have come to appreciate those individuals—student, adolescent, and adult—who know how to give back to society, especially in the adult years.

Additional Readings

“Casa Dei Bambini and Beyond: Montessori Schools Hit the Century Mark in Stride,” by Dane Peters, *Independent School Magazine*, Spring 2008.

Montessori Today: A Comprehensive Approach to Education from Birth to Adulthood, Paula Polk Lillard, Schocken Books, New York, 1996.

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