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Montessori Education Components and Behavioral Benefits

Framing Narrative

Montessori education is a form of interactive schooling, typically geared toward younger children. This educational approach was founded by Maria Montessori, an Italian physician, innovator, and educator. Montessori studied and developed an education system built on the way children tend to naturally comprehend the world. She developed an interest in education when she was asked to improve teaching methods in special education. She soon became invested in improving general educational methods and utilized the knowledge she gained as a psychiatrist to develop a new system of teaching (American Montessori Society, 2018). Consequently, Montessori education is deeply rooted in the developmental progress of children to provide an authentic educational method (Echazarra et al 2016).

This style of learning has received a wide range of attention across the world since its creation in the early 1900s. Europe welcomed the structure of Montessori school long before America, likely because of proximity to the first location in Rome, Italy. Opening in 1907, Maria Montessori's first school was called Casa dei Bambini, The First House of Children, where she refined her educational method (Lillard, 2013). Her work had a rapid global response. Within only five years, schools opened as far as an outdoor classroom at the University of Virginia (Holsinger et al, 1976). The booming trend of Montessori school had died down within fifty years of its birth, notably in America, due to the opening of public kindergartens and nursery schools (Hymes, 1966). However, Maria Montessori's influence endures in the communities where Montessori education systems still operate and subtly in the way lower public education systems are designed now.

Maria Montessori wrote a complete guide to Montessori teaching that describes the basic educational setup for her method. Montessori classrooms typically contain students within three years of each other who are free to interact and communicate. Course work is kept open on shelves around the room available to children and designed so that learning occurs without direct teacher

supervision. Typically, the course work is tightly interconnected so that the children can learn material in the order they choose and make choices autonomously (Lillard, 2013). Children are encouraged to guide their own educational experience and build their learning through interactive activities.

Montessori education is widely accepted as an effective teaching method, but there are also many behavioral effects that resonate in the children and individuals with Montessori backgrounds. Children raised in a Montessori environment grow into individuals who have subtly different approaches to observing and comprehending the world. As children, these effects can be seen in their inclination to physical activity, creativity, social cooperation, and various cognitive tendencies. Research has been done to examine how the Montessori method can extend past childhood to influence communities that tend to have emotional struggles such as veterans and dementia patients.

History and Context

Although there are Montessori schools scattered across the United States, its influence on American society remains small. Public schools and other larger scale schools still tend to lean toward traditional teaching styles for convenience. This trend may deserve some revision considering Montessori education's positive effects on individuals.

The Montessori method emphasizes different methods to problem-solving techniques than traditional school setups. Montessori teaching tends to leave the learning up to the child. This allows the brain to train in various cognitive functions that rely less on memorization. This is exemplified in one study comparing Montessori student performance with traditionally trained students in various tests. In the cognitive section of this study, the Montessori students showed higher performance in each of the seven measurements of academic-based cognitive ability (Lillard, 2006). Although these results cannot be generalized to say that all Montessori students develop cognitive skills at a more efficient rate, they do display a correspondence between the Montessori method and an emphasis on cognitive ability.

Many components to Montessori teaching are unrelated to academics. One surprising observation made by another comparison study between Montessori and traditional students was the variation in physical activity levels. The study concluded that the Montessori children in the study tended to be more active than those in traditional preschool settings and went on to suggest the Montessori method may be a noteworthy strategy in increasing physical activity levels in younger

children (Pate et al, 2014). The earlier comparison study also reported that when instructed to write an essay, the Montessori students generally produced more creative essays with more complex themes and sentence structures (Lillard, 2006). Again, it is difficult to translate these small-scale studies to general trends. However, these case-by-case observations tend to paint a similar picture of more active child minds correlated to the open and autonomous environment created by the Montessori method.

The main non-academic value emphasized in the Montessori classroom is the will to foster a space for social acceptance within the community. The Montessori Middle School of Kentucky accomplished this by holding daily morning meetings to encourage students to share and solve community problems in a civil and open environment. These kinds of practices may contribute to the results found in the previous study which showed the students in the Montessori group responded more positively to statements like “Students in my class really care about each other” and “Students in this class treat each other with respect” in a questionnaire about the school environment (Lillard, 2006). Placing an active value on respecting others and resolving conflict helps build individuals into more thoughtful and active citizens when dealing with conflicts in the workplace or large-scale social problems.

Looking past the general population, implementing Montessori in lower-income communities may help combat the cycle of poverty. This self-driven learning style assists in preparing students for higher education and seeking their own opportunities. One study which examined the school readiness in low-income Black and Latino children suggested that leaning away from conventional pre-k programs and toward tailored educational programs could help give an edge to children from less privileged backgrounds (Ansari, 2014). Incorporating Montessori methods into the general public-school setting could help support equal opportunity for students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Of course, there are issues with implementing Montessori teaching throughout the public-school system. Since the classroom design is an integral component to the Montessori method, wide-scale implementation would mean mass school redesign which would be extremely difficult to fund. Lesson plans would need restructured and teachers retrained nationwide. For these reasons, it is much more reasonable to integrate the Montessori method into the traditional class setting in moderation. It is worth examining the values and learning approaches enforced by Maria Montessori and translating them reasonably into the traditional classroom. Although full Montessori conversion

for younger education would be ideal, it is much more practical to incorporate the teachings on a smaller scale.

Relevance

Global conflict plagues our generation. Technological advances and mass-production agricultural pursuits threaten the sustainability of the natural world. There are corrupt governments, social unrests, and places where basic life needs cannot be met. Our generation needs individuals that are aware of their environment and determined to solve conflict in a civil way that benefits all members of the global community. Montessori education provides early educational benefits to produce individuals grounded with a value system that promotes acceptance and peace when confronted with differences. Building a foundation for invested learning and communal problem solving sets the ground for individuals to become invested and active global citizens. Even past childhood education, the Montessori method could still be helpful in bettering the lives of many. Researchers have begun looking into how components of the Montessori approach could help benefit communities with emotional struggles like veterans (Hilgeman et al, 2012) and dementia patients (Wilks et al, 2015). Implementing the Montessori method, at least in moderation, throughout the United States, and the rest of the world, could have dramatic results for positive social change.

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