

Freedom Within Limits: Student-Centered Learning

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Montessori History

Dr. Maria Montessori (1870-1952), the creatress of what is called “The Montessori Method of Education” was a medical doctor by training. Her outstanding contribution to educational pedagogy enabled her to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize three times, in 1949, 1950 and 1951. The Montessori Method is a Student-Centered Method that is nearly 100 years old.

The Montessori Philosophy

Dr. Maria Montessori believed that it is the spirit of the child that can determine the course of human progress and leads to perhaps a higher form of civilization.

- The goal of Montessori education is to foster autonomous, competent, responsible, adaptive citizens who are lifelong learners and problem solvers.

- Learning occurs in an inquisitive, cooperative and nurturing atmosphere. Students

increase their own knowledge through self-and teacher-initiated experiences.

- The individual is considered as a whole. Physical, social, aesthetic, and cognitive needs and interests are inseparable and equally important.

- Respect for self, others, the environment, and life is cultivated as necessary to developing a caring attitude.

- Each student is offered help in order to reach his/her full potential in all areas of life.

- For example, the teacher provides the necessary resources, including opportunities for the students to function in a safe and positive climate. The teacher thus gains the students’ trust, which enables the student to try new things and build self-confidence.

- Self-development, self-correcting materials, the teacher as an observer and directress, and the freedom to move and work within the classroom are all characteristic of the Montessori Philosophy.

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The Teacher

The Montessori teacher is a growing person, who is involved in the realistic process of evaluating his/her own capabilities and behavior.

The teacher motivates the student, and observes where the student's interests rest. The teacher encourages the student to become an independent individual.

First, a teacher is one who serves. The teacher allows the student to be free to choose his/her work. It is an intimate relationship with the student in which the teacher is a facilitator.

Second, the teacher ensures that each child is loved and has a conducive environment for inner development.

Third, there is the faith that the student will reveal him/herself through the process of work.

Montessori at the College-Level in the US & Thailand

When people think of "A Montessori Approach to Education," they typically think of pre-school; however, this is a misconception, as the Montessori Approach, or the Student-Centered Approach is applicable to young adults as well as evidenced by the facilitator's personal experience.

As a college student, the facilitator attended a non-traditional, experiential college in the United States where the emphasis was on: "ungraded work," the teacher served as an observer and facilitator, the students completed cycles of work—each at her own pace, and the students selected their own materials and topics for personal conferences with their teachers. A student became her own self-motivating force. There was recognition of sensitive periods of learning, frustration, and overcoming obstacles. And when in groups, the students were quiet out of respect for each other, as they wanted to learn about each other's ideas and feelings. There was individual learning, group learning, and frequent personal conferences with teachers.

Based upon the facilitator's actual experiences in a Student-Centered Approach to College Education, the researcher explored the use of a Montessori approach at a college in Thailand, namely at Southern College of Technology. The arena was English and the setting was informal, compassionate, inner-directed, fostering curiosity, and encouraging individual exploration and sharing. The teacher or facilitator of the class displayed concern for the young adults in their lives. The young people were repeating the class, having all failed in a prior attempt.

The facilitator taught in a “prepared environment,” a user-friendly room adjacent to her office, with magazines in English, as well as, an online computer. There was the sense of a home-like environment and a school environment. There was order, and the young people could ask for assistance at any time individually. The one who facilitated sat in a simple plastic chair and the young adult who came for the consultation also sat in a simple plastic chair. There was no desk used. Human to human, the heart contact was made.

Sometimes, a student would go to the library to return with additional learning materials to share with a friend. Sometimes, a young person would go to the internet room. The space was free yet bounded. The reticent or hurt young adult was given special attention. The curious young adults were offered the opportunity to direct the class at times. They went to the white board and shared their newly discovered vocabulary words, as well as, their new ideas and eventually their new writing.

There were no topics covered. The young adults selected their own topics, their own style of writing, and their own vocabulary. Each worked to make meaning of his/her life. One wrote about “Shrimp” as her family had a shrimp farm. Another wrote about enjoyable times at the

“Waterfall,” where she and her friends journeyed for time to reflect upon life. One young man, who had a troubled relationship with his father, wrote about the King of Thailand. He wrote, “The King is my good father because he always forgives me.” The student created a fantasy relationship with the King in order to receive the approval of his actual parent. One young lady wrote about her love for “Her Dog.” Another wrote about her hobby of collecting “Mickey Mouse” memorabilia, which inherently ordered her personal life. A young man wrote about his dream of one day owning a car, “A Beetle.”

In small groups of 3-4, they assisted each other. The one facilitating was available for consultation, and helped to inspire, encourage, and guide the students towards gradual understanding of writing, and brainstorming. The young adults learned the abstract concept of creating a mental map of their writing, allowing their inner concerns and topics to arise naturally and then linking them together abstractly, diagrammatically in order to eventually create paragraphs and stories.

There were no students who failed the class, and in fact the students came and sat in the room to be near each other and the teacher in a friendly family-like manner. They took their lunch meals together and displayed concern to

bring food for those who remained behind in the room. They cultivated their social, psychological, and intellectual skills, as well as, their English skills.

And, also important to note is that the students enjoyed being together and learning. They exhibited periods of intense concentration interspersed with bursts of laughter and joy.

Montessori at the Elementary-Level in Thailand

This case study is ongoing at Tantiwatra Elementary School in Thung Song, Thailand. The facilitator writes.

1. We have gained good success in implementing a partial Montessori program in the area of English language teaching. Phonetics classes employ the use of sandpaper letters in order for students to use their sense of touch while sounding the letters of the alphabet. They trace the letters with their fingers, and learn the shapes of the letters in preparation for future development of writing skills.

2. 80% of our children are able to read phonetically before the age of 6. They are able to sound the alphabet just as a native speaker.

3. The majority of children in Primary Grade 3 can read short passages for reading comprehension exercises.

Conclusion

Sometimes between cultures and time periods we adapt with the flow of a new idea, yet may not know of the source. As Thailand now looks at Student-Centered Learning, it is wise to return to a significant source and reflect upon a pioneer in the field, Dr. Maria Montessori and her voluminous observations and writings on student-centered education.

References

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