

# WHY SHOULD MY FAMILY CONTINUE TO STICK WITH A MONTESSORI EDUCATION FOR THE ELEMENTARY YEARS?

by Tanya Rykind and Jenny Schanker

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Your daughter is turning five years old and the next door neighbor asks you if you have registered for kindergarten. You haven't. Your daughter has been attending a Montessori school and you have been pleased with her progress and development. But you are not sure if she should continue on in the Montessori elementary program.

For most families, the question triggers a variety of different emotions. Memories of "school" become more vivid for most of us. It is one of the few experiences we all have in common – "school". We remember our teachers, our lessons, our playground, the homework, and the friends. We tend to believe that we received a good, if not, a great education. And if we are successful, it is hard for us to imagine that our elementary education didn't contribute partly to our success. So, why should your family stick with a Montessori education for the elementary years?

There are five compelling reasons why a Montessori elementary education adds significant value to the future success of your child.

1. A Montessori elementary education does more than most traditional programs to develop independent and critical thinking skills.
2. A Montessori elementary education gives lessons and presentations that nurture the multiple intelligences of each child and capitalize upon recent scientific research.
3. A Montessori elementary education offers children a wider array of academic work than traditional educational models in a safe and age appropriate environment.
4. A Montessori elementary education offers children a community dedicated to creating a peaceful world.
5. A Montessori elementary education does more to celebrate differences and understand of world cultures.

## 1. INDEPENDENT & CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

Children who continue their Montessori education into the elementary years will continue to develop their potential as independent, critical thinkers. Beginning with infants and toddlers, Montessori environments guide children to become physically and emotionally independent and self sufficient. Young children are given the tools to set the table, prepare the snack and wash the dishes. Your child has washed dishes, sliced bananas, swept crumbs, and put her work back from the place she got it. She has also practiced problem-solving skills such as using appropriate words to express emotion, and used mechanisms like tally stones and peace roses to cope with interpersonal conflicts.

In Montessori programs, elementary children learn to balance a striking degree of freedom with a sense of responsibility and self-determination. The children learn to allocate their time between academic responsibilities and caring for their classroom environment, and to understand the importance of developing and expressing their own opinions. When 10-year-old Noah was asked to give his observation about the differences between his public school experience and his Montessori school experience, he said, "You can disagree with the teacher and not get into trouble here."

A group of 16 Montessori elementary children were asked to contemplate whether it is important to have Their friends like the things they like. The children were asked to go to one side of the room if they agreed with the statement and the other side of the room if they disagreed. At first blush, all the children agreed with this

statement. Then, one child, age 9, stepped out and said, "I'm changing my mind. I think that it is easier to make new friends who have things in common with me but when I have more time being friends with someone, I am able to disagree with them without hurting their feelings." Her experiences in a Montessori classroom, where she was confident that she was valued as an individual, allowed this child to step out of a group, act independently from her peers, and think for herself.

## **2. MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES**

The Montessori elementary classroom is prepared to honor the multiple intelligences of each child. Multiple Intelligences is the work of Howard Gardner who brought to light the various ways in which our brain learns. Some children are visual learners, some learn through logical reasoning and mathematical deduction and others may learn from the natural world. Gardner's work has determined there to be 8 intelligences which predominate in some greater than others.

Montessori elementary education addresses the needs of children who learn by doing, seeing, hearing, building, dancing, drawing, socializing, and listening to their inner self because it follows the child and changes the environment to enhance learning. It is common to see a variety of hands-on materials in every subject area. There are globes, models of the solar system, skeletons, sandpaper letters, calligraphy pens, and yes, there are beads. Beads are used to engage children kinesthetically. Beads are a visual tool to show abstract concepts concretely. And beads, especially the traditional glass beads, offer the child the beauty of color, shape, and texture.

Aesthetics are extremely important in the Montessori classroom. Rooms are prepared very carefully, to be beautiful, calm and peaceful. Music may play softly in the background. There may be headphones in baskets on work shelves. An area is dedicated to the study of sound, tone, and pitch. There are the Montessori bells, recorders, drums. Children are encouraged to sing, hum, tap, and move their bodies rhythmically while working. Children are invited to use their senses; to taste, smell, hear, touch, and see. Instead of worksheets, Montessori classrooms have children working with food, smelling perfumes to explore how smells dissipate, listening to concertos, and knitting. Songs are sung, poetry chanted, plays recited, stories told. Students have access to an outdoor environment to study nature, watch birds or sit and listen to the sounds.

Children who learn by doing are encouraged to do while children who learn by reading are invited to read. Montessori invites children to learn the way they learn best while strengthening the other intelligences they are capable of using so that they can reach their personal potential.

## **3. WIDE ARRAY OF ACADEMIC WORK**

Walk into a Montessori classroom and you may see children conjugating verbs in English, Spanish or Japanese. You may see a group of students conducting an experiment to demonstrate the differences between acids and bases. You may even see a group of children knitting, discussing how to make patterns with a purl or a knit.

Every Montessori elementary program will have works that expose, encourage and invite the child to learn concepts and ideas about history, geology, geography, mathematics, language, astronomy, ecology, chemistry, anthropology, astronomy, physics, biology, microbiology, sociology, and geometry. The geography curriculum, for example, distinguishes itself from a traditional program because it offers so much more in depth action and hands-on activity. Children who have been in a Montessori infant/toddler program or primary program have touched and seen the small globe of the earth. The globe is made so that each continent is elevated and coarse. The continents are sand papered giving the child a "feel" for the shape and size of each continent.

The elementary program offers students opportunities to make continents and land forms. Classrooms have trays with water and clay so that children can mold, make and see the land form. In an upper elementary classroom materials are given to the children to expand and deepen their knowledge. Children are given access to maps, compasses, graph paper, and over head projectors, helping students to understand the making of a planet, the concept of plate tectonics, and the evolution of the cosmos. Traditional classrooms may touch upon concepts and ideas, but only the prepared Montessori environment gives children the breadth, depth and time to experience intellectual work without Interruption.

#### **4. COMMUNITY & COMMITMENT TO WORLD PEACE**

The Montessori elementary program is different than all other educational models in that it is committed to giving children a "Cosmic Education" and teaching universal values of respect, tolerance, and trust that will create a peaceful world.

Dr. Montessori believed that children who knew who they were personally and in the big picture of the human experience were more likely to care for themselves and for the world around them in ways that would foster peace. Cosmic Education offers the child opportunities to understand the interconnectedness of all things and the personal responsibility needed for the care and well-being of all things. According to one father, "the common goal is the well-being of my children. I want my children to know they are part of a bigger community than just their family or school. I want them to know they are cared for and listened to. In turn, they care and listen. For me, Montessori teaches the importance of being responsible for each other, not just acquainted with each other." Because of this commitment to "Cosmic Education" and Peace Education, there are lessons, activities and resources on the shelves that teach about the birth of the cosmos, evolution of the species, fossil records showing the recent understanding of the growth of the human being, and timelines of the development of language and numbers.

There are lessons describing the major world religions, what they believe, how they practice. There is a peace corner, dedicated to quiet and stillness. Classrooms have community meetings where children are invited to discuss classroom issues, concerns or activities. Children discuss, decide, and brainstorm solutions that work for them. Children and adults work together to build a peaceful and harmonious community of learners.

Service to the community is also an active way in which Montessori classrooms teach the web of relationships. By reaching out to the community, students see the greater community. Students may visit assisted living centers, fund raise for a homeless shelter, or work at the local center for stray animals. All of these experiences are integrated into the work of the Montessori student. The commitment to offering children opportunities to belong to a community by participating in real life experiences as well as asking children to examine the mysteries of the universe prepares children not only to live in the "real world", but assume responsibility for its well-being.

#### **5. CELEBRATING DIFFERENCES & UNDERSTANDING WORLD CULTURES**

In Montessori schools, developing an appreciation for diversity and understanding cultures form the backbone of the academic curriculum and enliven the social atmosphere. Most Montessori schools actively recruit a diverse student body, and involve the whole family in activities that foster intercultural understanding and a playful exploration of the global village. This unfolds as a strong international education where lessons delve deep into the habits, life styles, arts, religions, and languages from around the world.

Because the Montessori "family" is international, many schools choose to have international dinners, dance and

art workshops, cultural performances, international pen pals, and exchange programs. School-wide celebrations of world cultures enrich the communal life of each Montessori family. Around the school and in the classrooms, there may be expressions of world cultures. Flags from around the world may be displayed. Outside, a pole proclaiming peace in many languages may stand prominently in a garden space. Artifacts and clothing from around the world may be hung on walls throughout the building. Students may research other places in the world and go so far as to invite guests to share experiences and stories of their culture. Children may sit down to meals prepared by classmates, appreciating different foods and different ways of preparing foods.

Through field trips, Montessori elementary children learn to appreciate the culture of the communities in which they live and attend school. Visits to local businesses, surrounding farms or ranches, sites of local industry, and hospitals help them understand the influences that shape their surroundings. Hands-on study of regional geography, history, and natural environment gives the children the sense of connection necessary for the development of thoughtful, culturally literate citizens.

The goal of the cultural education program in Montessori elementary programs is to teach interconnectedness and social responsibility. The focus is the celebration of differences and an understanding of how those differences enrich our lives. In the end, the answer to the question, "should my family continue to stick with a Montessori education for the elementary years?" must grow from the answer to some further questions. What skills do I believe my child needs to succeed in the 21st century? What do we value as parents? Is it important for my child to be an independent and critical thinker? Do we want our child to learn to use the full potential of his multiple intelligences? Does she need opportunities for true intellectual work in a variety of subjects? Do we value a safe, peaceful environment where our children's needs are paramount? Do we believe in the power of cultural understanding to build the tolerance and appreciation necessary to create a better world for future generations? If your answers to these questions are a resounding "yes", why look beyond your Montessori environment for the kind of education you seek for your child?

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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