

How Do Montessori Students Cope With Transitioning from a Non-evaluative System to One of Evaluation and Assessment?

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Introduction

According to Schmidt (2008), the focus of a Montessori education differs from a traditional system as we put emphasis on different qualities that cannot be graded. "The role of education is to interest the child profoundly in an external activity to which he will bring all his potential" (Montessori, as cited by Schmidt, p. 5). Tim Seldin, President of The Montessori Foundation (2009), described the outcomes of a Montessori education as: intrinsic motivation, internalized ground rules and ability to work with external authority, creativity and originality of thought, social responsibility, autonomy, confidence and competence, spiritual awareness, and academic preparation. A Montessori teacher supports the child to reach these outcomes.

Research Question

The parent commonly poses the dilemma that is often heard by administrators: "We've loved having Jeremy in Montessori school, but it's time for him to go to first grade at a real school" (Schmidt, 2008, p. 5). To which Schmidt remarked, Jeremy may be a thoughtful and considerate 6-year-old who is reading, has memorized his multiplication facts, and can name all fifty states and his/her capitol, but his parents don't see his Montessori school accomplishments as valid (p. 5)

Sometimes the parent decides to have their child stay and experience the lower elementary. Then the parent faces the decision once again, three years later, whether to have their child remain for the upper elementary and complete the elementary program. Then the same questions remains- will their child have a difficult time transitioning to a 'real school with marks and testing? How will they cope with the change in methodology?

Studies have been done in the United States to see how the students fair academically in the Montessori schools vs. students in the traditional school (Glenn, 1993; Rathunde & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005). These studies support that Montessori students do very well academically when transferring to a traditional system.

This study will research graduate students to support the hypothesis that if Montessori graduates (leaving the elementary system at age 12) did well in a traditional setting, they must have adjusted well to writing tests and receiving grades.

This research was done due to experiencing the declining student numbers for the upper elementary classrooms and thus jeopardized my job security or someone else's.

Research Methods

The study required both a quantitative study, through a survey, and a qualitative perspective using interviews which allowed a more personal perspective of what the graduates' experienced to be shared. The survey was passed to Montessori schools, via the Canadian Council of Montessori Administrators, who were asked to pass it to their alumni list pass it to those who had completed an upper elementary program. The survey asked for volunteers to participate in an interview. Only 7 responded to the survey during a limited two-week period. Of those, only 2 conducted the interview.

The Findings

The Transition to a Non-Montessori Education System

Table 1 represents the participants' memory of how they felt upon leaving the Montessori system and starting in a non-Montessori school. Table 1 gives the responses where 100% (n=7) of the respondents were both nervous and excited. Five participants commented they were enthusiastic. One participant added in the "other" category in the survey that they were, "confident."

Table 1
Feelings Prior to Starting in a New School System

How would you describe your feelings before starting in your first non-Montessori schooling system? (Please select all that apply)			
Answer Options	Yes	No	Response Count
Nervous	7	0	7
Anxious	3	3	6
Excited	7	0	7
Enthusiastic	5	0	5
Other	1	0	1
Other (please specify)			1
<i>answered question</i>			7

The respondents were asked to comment on receiving grades in the traditional system and comparing this new style of report card to the narrative received in Montessori. The comments were as follows: "It didn't bother me at all. The grades were more tangible than comments. I feel that being graded on work is more reflective of your progress than narrative reports, or a simple A, B, C grading (Participant #2). "A bit funny at first but got used to it quickly" (Participant #7). "I understood the new system and knew what was expected" (Participant #4). Two participants struggled with the tests and commented on his/her struggle. "I did not feel it necessarily reflected my work, and it took time to realize that it only reflected the teacher's evaluation of my work based on her own expectations" (Participant #3). Participant #6 commented that, "My struggle with tests was that they were used as a measure of what I knew. I remember getting 6/10 in a math quiz because I misplaced a decimal when I copied from my rough work to the final answer. The teacher told me I had to practice multiplication. I told her I didn't but just mis-wrote the answer." Participant #5 failed the first test and commented on it: "I struggled on my first test because I thought the numbers in the margin (i.e., the marks allotted to each question) were the number of words our English teacher wanted as a response to the question. I failed the test miserably.

Table 2
Did the Report Card Grades Reflect What You Expected to Receive?

Were you prepared for the grades you received on a report card in the non-Montessori school?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	100.0%	7
No	0.0%	0
<i>answered question</i>		7

The Interviews: Grading and marks. When asked about the transition to a grading system, Megan, as pseudonym, went back to this story and commented, "Well, that was an adjustment for me. Going from understanding what I wanted to do versus what the teacher wanted me to do. So that exam in grade 7 really helped me figure out what the external grading system is all about" (Interview #2, p. 7). When I asked how long it took to figure this out, her response was, "Well from September to December, so 3 months. And considering I have been alive for 36 years, I don't think that's very long at all...Montessori prepares you for life, not for high school" (Interview #2, p. 7).

The question posed for this research was, "How do Montessori students cope with transitioning from a non-evaluative system to 1 of evaluation and assessment?" Table 3 indicates the time frame that was required for the students to feel comfortable learning in his/her new environment. As shown in Table 3, 57.1% (n=4) of the participants found they were comfortable within a month. Two participants found it took less time than a month; whereas, 1 participant felt he/she never fit in.

Table 3
Timeframe for Feeling Comfortable in the Environment

How long did it take you to feel comfortable in the environment?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
2 weeks	14.3%	1
3 weeks	14.3%	1
a month	57.1%	4
three months	0.0%	0
six months	0.0%	0
longer than 1 year	0.0%	0
never fit in	14.3%	1
<i>answered question</i>		7

Social Transition

Fifty-seven percent (n=4) of the survey respondents answered that the social transition was the greatest concern for them at the time. Remembering that the student is 11 or 12 years of age and very socially-oriented at this stage, this is not surprising. Megan expressed the transition well:

I would say a transition is a transition. It doesn't matter whether you are transitioning from a Montessori elementary to a middle school or a traditional elementary to a middle school. There is still a transition that the child goes through. I think most of us realized what we needed to do and how to get where we wanted to go. And I think that's what Montessori does for kids. It helps you identify your goals and it helps you figure out how to get there" (Interview #2, p. 9).

This statement is why I believe that the transition from a Montessori school to a non-Montessori school is not a difficult one, rather, it is simply a transition and we all need time to adjust to any change that occurs in our lives.

Megan reminded us that Montessori is not intended to be a preparation for high school, but for life. As Survey Participant #5 stated,

Montessori was an integral part of my education and contributed in part to some of the qualities that contributed to my success in later school years: initiative, self-motivation, independence, self-awareness, respect for myself and others, responsibility and empathy, and love of learning.

Montessorians need to promote the value of the Montessori education as a preparation for life and accept, and openly admit, that there will be a transition period of adjustment for the students when they graduate from a Montessori elementary program and change to a traditional method of education.

Implications for Montessori Practices

This study's purpose was to support previous research conducted that presented the academic achievements of students who have left the Montessori environment. It is assumed that testing and grading are not issues for the students transitioning. However, there needed to be some direct research to support this supposition. Thus, my study addressed directly how Montessori students transitioned regarding taking tests and coping with formal evaluation when entering a conventional education system.

Both people in the interview expressed how they felt that his/her Montessori experience made more of an impact later in life as a Montessori education goes beyond academics. They expressed that it was in university, or in graduate school, that they were able to use some of his/her creativeness and leadership skills which were developed in Montessori.

It was the interview that exposed some of the transition difficulties. Some difficulties were expected, but the results showed that it was not academic, rather mostly social or the adaptation to the style of teaching. But at the same time, it was the qualitative study that also provided information regarding the lifelong value of a Montessori education.

Limitations and Recommendations

More study involving greater participation in both the survey and interviews would validate this current research as this research was limited due to the restrictions regarding the timing and delivery of the survey. Research could be done comparing those students that left at the end of lower elementary and compare his/her transition and later progress with those that stayed and completed the upper elementary progress. This may give further proof on the importance of completing the Montessori elementary program.

It would be interesting to conduct more studies from the parent's perspective as to how the child transitioned. Hanson (1998) did find that parents rated the transition lower on a scale than students or teachers did (pp 2-4). This may present more of an understanding as to the parents' concerns when his/her child experiences the transition. Following along the same lines, surveying teachers receiving students from Montessori schools would be fascinating in order to learn how they saw the transition compared with other students transitioning from a non-Montessori

Recommendations

This study can help support Montessori educators to stress that a Montessori education looks at the whole being so that the child can reach his/her full potential, not just in the present time, but also looking to the future.

Research in the outcomes of a Montessori education needs to continue so that parents can focus more on the ultimate goal of a Montessori education—the development of the "whole personality" (Montessori, 1912, p. 21) so that the child's ultimate potential can be reached.